

# Limits and Possibilities of Middle Class Associations as Urban Collective Actors

LALITHA KAMATH, M VIJAYABASKAR

Studies on Resident Welfare Associations draw attention to their predominantly middle class and exclusive character. Based on survey and ethnographic data on such associations across diverse neighbourhoods in Bangalore, this paper reveals the fractured, often contradictory, nature of claims made by different sections of middle class. The category urban “middle class” is too homogeneous to account for the multiple locations, interests, and varied access to power of different sections. Homogenising the middle class produces a “middle class-urban poor” dualism which elides critical factors shaping middle class mobilisation, internal conflicts, and local histories and geographies of development of specific neighbourhoods that are integrally linked to land values. This mapping of middle class action also contributes to our understanding of the process of structuration of urban spaces as new strategies are deployed to transform Indian cities.

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Lalitha Kamath is a freelance researcher based in Bangalore and M Vijayabaskar (*baskarv@mids.ac.in*) is with the Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai.

This paper maps the terrain and limits of collective action of the “middle class” in urban India through a study of Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) in Bangalore city. A key premise of the ongoing urban governance reforms is that a combination of user participation and marketisation of service delivery can deliver better outcomes for citizens. A major mode of producing consent for such moves is to enhance the role of “civil society” organisations including RWAs in the process of urban governance. The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), for instance, mandates adoption of the Community Participation Law to access its funds.<sup>1</sup> Ideas of participation and empowerment are deployed to include a range of practices that seek to redirect the role of the state and socially embed the process of marketisation. RWAs and other urban neighbourhood associations are increasingly visible in these processes as actors staking claims on public services, and as institutions representing the voice of citizens.

In the recent past, the vibrancy of associational life has received considerable scholarly attention. Studies of neighbourhood associations in India including RWAs and their role (Harriss 2005; Narayanan 2005; Arabindoo 2005; Tawa Lama-Rewal 2007; Zérah 2007) draw attention to the class character of such associations and the dominant presence of middle class associations in such exercises. Drawing implicitly on Chatterjee’s (2001) distinction between “civil” and “political society”, such dominance, they point out, tends to exclude the voices of the poorer sections, i.e., members of the political society.<sup>2</sup> We argue that this emphasis on the exclusionary bias, while extremely valid, tends to reinforce the notion of the middle class as a singular category pitted against poorer groups. Fernandes (2007: 194), in her discussion of Chatterjee’s formulation, hints at the limits of such a dualistic conception

...the limitation to this formulation is that it assumes that the elites... form a homogeneous group whose interests are represented in self-evident ways in civil society. ...Chatterjee’s conception rests on an assumption of a naturalised identification between civil society, elite middle class expression (voice), and the representation of a homogeneous set of middle class interests. In effect, such a notion conflates dominant conceptions of elite or middle class identity...with the broader and highly differentiated group that constitutes the middle class.

If the middle classes are fragmented, what are the critical factors that fragment and shape the action of various segments for public services? What are the implications of such multiple interests for the discourse on collective action of the middle class? Are there sections within the “middle class” whose interests are more

aligned with the reform agenda? How does the recognition of the heterogeneity of middle class interests relate to the literature on urban middle class collective action? Focusing on a set of RWAs across a range of diverse neighbourhoods in Bangalore city, a city more “middle class” than any other Indian metropole,<sup>3</sup> the paper seeks to show the fractured and at times contradictory nature of claims made by different sections of the middle class. In doing so, we argue that the category urban “middle class” privileged in studies on collective action, is too homogeneous to account for the multiple locations, interests and concerns, and varied access to power of different sections. We point out that while some sections of the middle class are more critical to advancing the urban reform agenda, others are less so, and some even oppose the progress of reforms.

Even the constitution of the “consumer citizen” self, seen to be critical to the reform process, we argue, is unevenly mapped across different segments of the middle class. We trace the growing discursive and material convergence between urban reforms and articulations of certain elite sections of the middle class. We also contend that the emphasis on the middle class-urban poor dualism tends to elide other critical factors shaping middle class mobilisations; internal conflicts, differential economic interests and access to the arms of the state. The local histories and geographies of development of specific neighbourhoods, and nature of state interventions too have a conditioning role. Importantly, we argue, these factors are integrally linked to land values, use and exchange, current and future. This simultaneous mapping of middle class action in and on urban space also helps us understand the process of structuration of urban spaces as new strategies are being deployed by the state to transform urban India.

Further, similar to Coelho and Venkat (this issue), our fieldwork reveals that rather than a vibrant associational life, RWAs are marked by fragmentation, a lack of secondary tier leadership, a distrust of democratic modes of functioning, and weak associational participation largely driven by crises. While RWAs in general have been successful in resolving local public service delivery problems, the paper concludes that there are considerable limits to middle class collective action, both internal and external. This leads us to propose that scholars tend to overestimate the significance of RWAs in terms of actual activities and influence as well as shaping state policies, programmes and reform ideas. We therefore contest the idea of “elite capture” and argue for a more qualified notion of elite influence, one where the influence of middle class RWAs is more in some spheres and less in others, where their claims are contested more in some spheres and less in others. In the following section, based on literature and our own fieldwork, we delineate a typology representing what we perceive as major segments of the middle class in the context of collective action around urban services. In line with earlier studies on collective action in India, we treat the non-slum population to constitute the middle class in urban India.

## 1 Towards a Typology of Middle Class RWAs

The first segment is elite RWAs characterised as such because of their concerns around property (use) value and ownership and the actions they take to protect and distinguish them from less

affluent RWAs. Members tend to be largely employed in higher levels of the bureaucracy, older public and private corporate sector firms, and defence personnel. The second segment consist of RWAs representing upwardly mobile middle and lower middle classes who are more preoccupied with cashing in on high land values to enhance the exchange value (i.e., income flows) of their property. Members tend to be employed in middle and lower levels of the bureaucracy, police and private sector, involved in wholesale and retail trade, and other better paying informal sector jobs. Often, these segments are located in revenue layouts that have been regularised over time, expansions to urban villages, or semi-developed Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) layouts and, as a consequence, suffer patchy service delivery. RWAs representing this segment, particularly in the peripheral regions occupying “unauthorised” spaces, act to access and improve their amenities to standards comparable to the core city.

The next segment are largely traditional middle class RWAs consisting primarily of retired or older middle and higher level bureaucrats and formal sector employees, located in stable, older, core areas which have not experienced much growth and where there is no problem of basic amenities. They typically tend to focus their collective action efforts on local cultural and religious programmes.

Finally, there are RWAs of the new elites working in new globalised service sectors, living in enclaves and largely insulated from the problems of lack of amenities due to their location in gated communities.<sup>4</sup> Enjoying globalised standards of consumption, this transient “new rich” class often live in gated communities and tend to rely more on the market for their services rather than make direct claims on the state. For instance, while many traditional elite RWAs have directed their efforts at getting the government to provide for and maintain neighbourhood parks, developers of most gated communities provide private parks for the occupants. These enclaves are not however exclusively occupied by the new middle classes and include sections of the older middle classes adopting the new norms of consumption. The stakes for collective action tend to be less high for this section of the middle class even while their engagement with revenue layout RWAs grows increasingly contentious. Bangalore, which has witnessed the growth of several gated townships on its fringes, several new service sectors and continued white-collar and daily wage labour migration provides vivid glimpses into these tensions.

The larger study comprised of a sample survey in Bangalore of almost 180 neighbourhood associations – both middle class (mostly RWAs) and low-income – from eight neighbourhoods in the city. This was followed by ethnographies of associational activity in four neighbourhoods in Bangalore. Of the eight sample areas, five are within the inner core of the city and three are from the peripheries.<sup>5</sup> We obtained information on RWAs partly through RWA databases available with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and snow balling sampling techniques. The study also uses secondary sources, such as online archives of newspapers and neighbourhood magazines, for histories of collective action in these areas.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, we use a series of structural conflicts to throw light on the collective

action taken by different segments of the middle class. Patterns of collective action and conflict reveal how priorities and interests vary and are rooted in clashes around urban reforms, the economic forces that shape the growth of different segments and the history and geography of the neighbourhoods lived in. Next, we highlight the differences across these segments in the extent of participation and interaction with policymakers, access to the bureaucracy, and modes of collective action. The final section addresses the limits to collective action, internal and external, by the middle class as a whole, and argues that the influence of middle class associational life has been overstated.

## 2 Themes and Variations in Middle Class Mobilisation

While there are strong overlaps between the RWAs in terms of engagement with urban governance and service delivery, there are striking differences as well. Following scholars who highlight the internal differentiation of the middle class (Deshpande 2006; Fernandes 2007; Nair 2005), in this section, we seek to map the differences in the identification of the issues, patterns of collective action and ways that conflict animates different middle class RWAs.

Two rapidly growing neighbourhoods in the city core, Indiranagar and Koramangala are subject to a set of problems centred on commercialisation, gentrification and property values. Many brand outlets and retail chains have been opened in these neighbourhoods in the last few years making for prime shopping areas catering primarily to an elite clientele. The increase in traffic has therefore been particularly high. Land prices in some sections of these neighbourhoods are among the highest in the city. This has led to large numbers of building and zoning violations forcing a number of RWAs, including a few federations of RWAs, to take on these issues. Both neighbourhoods comprise a higher proportion of affluent population than many other middle class neighbourhoods, consisting of both current and retired senior level bureaucrats as well as young professionals drawn from the private sector, the software services sector in particular. There are several areas within Koramangala and Indiranagar, however, which have been developed as extensions of old villages such as Ejipura village or Koramangala village. These less affluent, semi-planned extensions with narrower lanes and more dense patterns of settlement are characterised by more middle and lower middle class populations working in the formal (e.g. mid and lower level government employees and workers in formal manufacturing sector) as well as informal sector (workers in both manufacturing and services).

In less affluent areas of these localities, upwardly mobile middle class residents have built up their plots, in violation of planning norms and procedures, to take advantage of the burgeoning rental market. Elite residents with larger plots by contrast are more concerned about their quality of life, which they argue, is deteriorating due to the “unauthorised” construction by the less affluent middle class in the neighbourhood. Problems with access to basic services like water, they claim, are because the neighbourhood infrastructure is not built to cope with five times the original number of residents. A major mobilising force bringing elite RWAs together are concerns around property use value and

ownership. The actions they take to defend them, often cloaked by addressing their “deteriorating quality of life” serve as markers for this category of RWAs. The discrepancy in basic services of roads and water supply between upper incomes and lower income localities in the neighbourhoods, in turn, leads to demands for much of the ward money to be spent in the latter to bring them on par with richer localities. This has been a further source of tension between elite RWAs and RWAs of the upwardly mobile middle classes.

Violation of planning norms and procedures is however not restricted to residents of non-elite areas. Most city residents indulge in unauthorised construction, although the lower middle classes tend to use it to enhance exchange value and income flows from their property (such as renting out of extra floors, garages or basements) and the upper middle classes tend to use it to enhance the value of their property such as including balconies in the room. Such differences, while indicating the fault lines within the middle class also highlights the differences in the factors driving collective action between these segments.

Conflicts over the uses land is put to (residential or commercial) are also increasingly visible. The emergence of a number of business start-ups, and small service providers – internet cafes, training centres and restaurants in residential areas – has led to an increase in traffic, pollution and parking problems in these neighbourhoods and a decline in quality of life, claim elite RWA members. A number of elite RWAs have tried to remove commercial establishments from their neighbourhoods. This affects both those middle class residents who have ventured into such commercial enterprise themselves and also residents who make use of these services. The issue reached flash point in March 2006 when an elite RWA from Koramangala filed a public interest litigation (PIL) against commercialisation and deteriorating quality of life. The PIL resulted in the Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BMP) inspecting many house building plans in Koramangala, on the orders of the high court, and demolishing three shops citing byelaw and zoning violations. Angered at the elite RWA petitioners, the upwardly mobile groups in Koramangala organised a bandh in protest. To quote a member of one of these RWAs, “I represent an association whose members are 99.9% in violation. You cannot expect me to say that I’ll be happy to demolish them. It’s a livelihood issue” (interview dated 12 April 2007).

Collective action among upwardly mobile RWAs is focused on fighting for space to ply their trades or defending their rights to enhance their livelihoods through additional constructions in their plots, often unauthorised. These conflicts over land use and access to land are often at the heart of struggles over mixed zoning, commercialisation and deteriorating quality of life. Referring to the PIL on commercialisation and deteriorating quality of life, a representative from an upwardly mobile RWA said,

In Koramangala it is another issue too: big developers and large IT companies collude with officialdom and also with certain middle class people who wanted to evict certain people anyway and used this (Koramangala PIL) as the right opportunity to do so. The middle class was attacked first. People were so angry. Ninety per cent of Koramangala was against this even though certain elite areas were for this. There was agitation on the streets (interview dated 12 April 2007).

The petitioners had to be given police protection for one week. The court ordered that the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) should not sanction further commercial licences in the area without surveying how many already existed and how this affected the quality of life for residents.

Contestations between upwardly mobile and elite RWAs are exacerbated when large infrastructure projects are sited in neighbourhoods, in a bid to achieve world-class city status. One such is the Bangalore Metro project that passes through Chinmaya Mission Hospital (CMH) Road, a commercial corridor of Indiranagar. Some sections of the upwardly mobile middle class are traders involved in retail business on CMH Road. To combat eviction and loss of income during construction and after, the traders association has made several representations to officials to change the route. Their protests against the alignment included hartals, court cases and submissions to local, state and national level politicians. They also sought the support of RWAs in the area in their effort. While there was consensus in the initial meetings, a rift developed with some of the RWAs feeling that the traders' stance against the Metro was not tenable. To them, it was good to have a "world-class" public transport system passing through that area. Also, more than 80% of traders on CMH Road are tenants (CASUMM 2007) and this was a further cause for division because the rehabilitation package for those being displaced clearly favoured owners over tenants and large establishments over small ones.

This episode foregrounds the need to take into account traders, entrepreneurs and tenants, not just owners of property, when conceptualising middle class collective action. While conventional wisdom suggests that tenants have less of a stake in the area they live/work in compared to owners, traders on CMH Road prove otherwise. They have, over the years, played a major role in developing amenities for the area and generating employment opportunities (CASUMM 2007). They also argue that their displacement frees up space for large real estate and corporate interests to enter the land and retail markets in the area through the vehicle of large infrastructure and the offices of the state. This process of gentrification has been assisted by certain elite sections of the middle class. Thus while concern over maintaining (and upgrading) property values and a certain quality of life has the effect of bringing together middle class residents of similar interests and class, it also divides the neighbourhood along the same lines.

In contrast to rapidly developing and commercialising neighbourhoods, like Indiranagar and Koramangala, where elite residents mobilise around (re)claiming access to land and improving basic amenities, similar to Smith's (1996) notion of vengeful reclamation of space or "revanchism", residents of older inner-core neighbourhoods like Malleswaram typically have access to basic services and seldom face the need to mobilise around them. Instead they are more active in organising religious and cultural programmes like festivals and Independence Day celebrations, and organising community development activities. In general these RWAs have little interaction with other middle class RWAs in contrast to the intense activity of RWAs in the periphery.

A majority of residents in the periphery live in unplanned (largely unauthorised) areas known as revenue layouts characterised by patchy access to basic infrastructure. Some of them also live in

cooperative housing societies promoted by public sector firms or utilities. They consist of a combination of middle class salaried employees and self-employed workers who cannot afford to buy plots/houses in the city core. There is also some proportion of landowning population who have shifted from farming to new land-based occupations like real estate and moneylending due to high land values and a small but growing affluent class living in large apartment complexes and gated communities on the peripheries. Revenue layouts are typically formed by the acquisition of agricultural land by private developers and subsequent development into "unauthorised" layouts without the necessary land conversion and planning permissions (Schenk 2001; Benjamin 2000). Since they are cheaper than planned layouts, amenities often are not to acceptable minimum standards prompting such "revenue layout RWAs" to engage in struggles and negotiations with local governments to access basic amenities.

Many residents of gated communities earn much higher incomes, are linked to the global economy and occupy new times-spaces like longer work hours and frequent travel. The high mobility, as Urry (2007) points out, creates new transient spatialities that are less rooted and such segments of the middle class "belong" less to their residence in specific localities. Highlighting the lack of time for associational work, a resident of a posh residential complex who is employed in a multinational software firm said, "I work 12 hours a day, six days a week when I am here. I travel once in three months for a week or two. My wife complains that I am hardly at home. ...Where is the time to work for the association?" (interview dated 11 March 2007). A signature campaign among this community to initiate action against a polluting firm nearby was a long drawn out affair for the same reason. It was simply difficult to meet people to get the signatures. Basic amenities are provisioned more through markets than by the state and hence less incentive to associate for services. These enclaves claim to provide international standards of amenities, such as private parks, security and maintenance systems. Often, street lights, underground drainage and internal roads are provided by the private property developer and garbage clearance is done by a private agency. This ability to wish away public provisioning and exit from claim making is unique to these new neighbourhoods.

Since enclave RWAs do not face problems in accessing basic amenities, there is far less scope for collaboration with other RWAs in the peripheries (Puri 2008). Often the disparities in basic services in the same locality – for instance, some gated community's access to more reliable and better quality surface water supply while revenue layouts rely on increasingly unreliable groundwater – creates tensions between them. Given the significant externality impacts of gated communities on the surroundings, like high land values due to large-scale acquisition for development, in-migration of construction labourers, and environmental pollution, the already strained relations between enclave RWAs and revenue layouts and village communities tend to get aggravated. A case in point is the recent notification published by the BMP stating,

It is hereby brought to the public notice that under the Town and Country Planning Act, there is no such concept of a 'Gated Community'. Once when any layout is formed, the roads in the said layout automatically



come under the jurisdiction of the respective municipal corporation the general public has free access to use the roads within the layout (Notification dated 20 May 2008).

This order, claims a federation of RWAs in south Bangalore, came about largely due to their efforts because they were furious that they had to circumvent a nearby gated community, travelling several additional kilometres to reach their homes. The enclave RWA, in turn, fought back to maintain controlled access to what it looked upon as its private road.

Such multiple sources of conflict between different segments of the middle class are not merely due to differential access to public services. Rather, the conflicts reflect how claims made by one segment exclude or undermine the rights and claims made by other segments. Studies of middle class action also point to the emergence of the voice of the citizen consumer that has become the dominant language of claim making in the context of improving and accessing urban services. In the next section, we show that even this language is confined to only the elite sections of the middle class.

### 3 Urban Reforms and Multiple Citizen Selves

Recent urban reforms being implemented across the country emphasise a role for citizen participation that is principally based on the citizen as consumer (World Bank 2004). Citizen engagement is held to build accountability where citizen engagement consists of participation via institutionalised complaint management systems and public consultation forums, monitoring of local services, and contribution through user fees. While such institutionalised participation mechanisms are biased towards the middle classes (Kamath et al 2008) in general, our fieldwork reveals some striking variations across the middle class. Among the elite sections of the middle class, reasons for associating are explicated using a language of exclusive citizenship that hinges on consumption, property and legality, all of which are critical in reinforcing the reform process in metropolitan India. Almost all elite RWAs have been involved in some form of public consultation or the other; this is in contrast to revenue layout and upwardly mobile RWAs in other neighbourhoods where few are even aware of the possibility of such participatory mechanisms. Payment of user fees reveals a more complex situation however as can be seen from the case of the Greater Bangalore Water and Sanitation Project (GBWASP), a project to deliver piped water supply to the peripheral areas of Bangalore.<sup>6</sup>

In accordance with reform diktats, almost 30% of the capital costs of GBWASP are to be raised through upfront beneficiary capital contributions (BCC) on the assumption that this would make citizens stakeholders in the project (Government of Karnataka 2005). The Bangalore Water Board stated that only those who paid BCC would be eligible to get water. Many revenue layout RWAs actively promoted BCC collection from their layouts not so much because they agreed to such a monetised conception of participation but because their need for water was severe. Unlike elite RWAs, who consistently use a language of “active citizenship”, other RWAs typically do not see their efforts as part of a “good governance” agenda. Their actions are rather driven by a need to obtain basic services and seldom couched in the language of active contribution to urban development.

This discursive difference is a striking one that bears closer examination. Elite RWA activists often cite reasons for associating in the language of citizenship. A member from an elite RWA described what motivates them and how they view their role as citizens:

What happens all the time is that a group of citizens meet and say how things are bad, corruption is pervasive and officers are non-transparent and do not bother to involve people who are affected. There is so much cynicism. People believe that something needs to be done but that someone else needs to do the job. Our basic philosophy is that we believe that we need to be the change we want to see... As citizens we need to not only be vigilant but do something about it... We have to establish our credibility with the system that we are not ‘traditional dissenters’ but ‘facilitators’ (interview dated 28 March 2007).

This is very much of a piece with “reform” language of public-private partnerships, of working together, of the move away from “aggressive confrontation” toward “constructive engagement” and the shift from “rowdy activist” to “engaged citizen” (Kamath 2006). Reasons for associating are also closely tied to responsibilities of citizenship. Another elite RWA member said, “I felt it was wrong to just pay taxes and expect the government to do everything else. I thought that I need to do something more as a citizen” (interview dated 2 February 2007). This works to discredit traditional methods of protests, methods that have been used by several non-elite RWAs that we studied.

In accordance with reform language is also the reliance on credentialled “expertise”. This resonates well with the reformers’ emphasis on outsourcing tasks to private consultants because local governments are deemed incapable of performing them, and together reveal a lack of faith in the local government, especially of politicians, and urges a greater role for RWAs in governance. Self-provisioning attempts by elite RWAs reveal confidence that their own efforts will be more effective than pushing governments for the same services. One of their members initiated two intra-neighbourhood bus routes. In Indiranagar, an elite RWA worked with the BMP for several years to successfully run a community garbage collection and composting scheme. Another RWA in the same neighbourhood employed a private person trained by the police department to regulate traffic in a busy junction in the neighbourhood. To support these initiatives, elite RWAs have also sponsored a range of equipment as well as technical studies. Such initiatives are completely absent in non-elite neighbourhoods.

The discourse on citizen responsibilities is also clearly tied to ownership of property. RWA struggles against the new BDA CDP can be interpreted as struggles to protect and sustain their property values. They require essential goods and services to be sold in their neighbourhoods but want other commercial enterprises to be regulated. This convergence between the reform discourse and the propertied citizen discourse, as Benjamin (2007) points out, is also therefore about a new consensus on a single kind of “order” defined by, for instance, only one or two forms of tenure (formal patta) as opposed to the multiple de facto forms of tenure that exist and that allow working class people to inhabit the city. The stress laid on eliminating citizen benefits for those who are “unauthorised” or “illegal” demands that residents be vigilant about who is breaking the law and perhaps even be involved in follow-up action. The greater role for civil society organisations (CSOs)

pushed by the JNNURM through its Community Participation Law also finds favour with elite RWAs. Other RWAs are not even aware of such avenues of participation. Such differences in perceptions and basis of collective action are likely to find their way into the practices and strategies of collective action across these segments of the middle class. The next section addresses these issues.

#### 4 Differential Access

Different RWAs not only access policymakers in different ways but also employ different strategies to stake their claims on land and resources. For upwardly mobile and revenue layout RWAs, the points of contact with the bureaucracy were mainly mid, lower and field level engineers. A federation of upwardly mobile RWAs in Koramangala has institutionalised this by organising monthly review meetings (MRMs) in their neighbourhood in both Kannada and English where residents meet local officials from various government departments to discuss the progress and status of ward projects and resolve local problems. Various strategies were used during the interaction: persuading officials to address issues between departments, urging them if matters were critical or unattended for some time, and questioning them about pending works. The RWAs claim that for solving local problems their high success rate is mainly due to the MRMs.

By contrast, elite RWA activists preferred to use their access to the topmost officials in the city, in keeping with claims made by scholars in the context of Delhi and Mumbai (Harriss 2005; Zerah 2007) regarding privileged access of upper/middle class associations to the administration. The elites tend to draw upon privileged social networks based on a common socio-economic background and the use of English language communication. At least two informants reported playing golf regularly with the ex-corporation commissioner. Another was a retired top official from the police force who categorically stated that bureaucrats would not fail to heed his call as he knew exactly “how to make them work”. Good access to bureaucrats was no doubt made easier by the many senior retired bureaucrats and public sector professionals in top associational positions in elite RWAs.

Middle class RWAs are often successful at resolving problems related to amenities in their neighbourhood through local officials and bureaucrats. Relationships with the political class have been far more antagonistic. As Zerah (2007) has described for Mumbai, most middle class RWAs in Bangalore think elected representatives are corrupt and lack vision since they are uneducated. However, they do interact with them as RWAs realise that corporators exert considerable influence locally. Different types of RWAs interact differently. Elite groups interact less with political parties and politicians compared to upwardly mobile and revenue layout RWAs who tend to be more comfortable conversing with councillors and work more closely with them for improving public services. The latter are also less averse to being overtly aligned with a political candidate or party. A member of an upwardly mobile RWA described their close interaction with the corporator thus.

We suffered a lot from the previous corporator because he was very against us. He was eating money and consciously neglecting our area. So for the next elections we pledged our support for a corporator

candidate from JD (U) and we canvassed directly for him. He won by a very narrow margin of 300 votes. He got 1,367 votes out of 7,000 polled. For a few things we got his support. When we organised dharnas and called him, he came and spoke. This was because of the relationship we had built up with him during canvassing (interview dated 12 April 2007).

Such RWAs are therefore more aware of and embedded in local political processes compared to the elite associations. While both elite and upwardly mobile RWAs deplore the reliance of slum populations on local councillors for gaining access to city resources outside the pale of the law, the latter are more cognisant of the difficulties of defining what is “illegal” and how the process of legalisation is to take place. To illustrate, it is clearly evident to them that people should not be allowed to pump directly from the water mains and they should not use more than the specified diameter of pipeline. However, many of them are in sympathy with the notion that the water board cannot charge slum-dwellers for water if they cannot afford it. Elite RWAs on the other hand typically focus more on the inefficiencies in service quality caused by illegal connections.

Local corporators are generally hostile towards all RWAs, but in particular to elite RWAs. A conversation with an ex-corporator elicited that middle class RWAs make a fuss about small pot holes or about the branches of an overhanging tree, that even though slum-dwellers’ problems relating to basic amenities are much more serious, they unfortunately get sidelined as the RWAs have political connections with ministers and their problems get prioritised. There seems to be the sense among corporators that not only are the needs of groups like elite RWAs and information technology companies privileged, but they have more influence over the city’s development plans. Speaking about the recently revised BDA CDP, an ex-corporator quipped “Ask Nandan Nilekani, he knows better than us”.

#### Tools of Social Accountability

Arguably, the more heterogeneous mix of residents in non-elite neighbourhoods and the severity of the problems they face make them more open to using explicitly confrontationist strategies like demonstrations on the streets at times of crisis. An upwardly mobile resident in Koramangala explained how he had led his RWA to protest on the streets when their area was flooded by rain-water mixed with sewage. Several revenue layout RWAs have organised street level demonstrations to protest the lack of supply of water despite payment of BCC under the GBWASP. Elite RWAs most commonly use the English media, the Right to Information (RTI) Act, the master planning process and the courts. In contrast to RWAs in non-elite neighbourhoods, they tend to have the social wherewithal to use the internet as an organising and communication tool in addition to more traditional practices of letter writing and making complaints. Elite RWAs also focus on and have greater access to the English language press, with at least five members reporting direct contacts in the English print media.

The master planning process has assumed new importance as a vehicle for elite RWA struggles because, in the main, it is for propertied citizens who inhabit ordered, authorised spaces. After the conflict that the Koramangala PIL against commercialisation

and violations threw up, elite RWAs prefer to fight issues like zoning and regularisation through the master plan. On areas like roads that are not likely to be divisive, regular RWA activities will proceed. But they increasingly tend to address what they call “encroachments” and zoning violations by arguing for enforcement of the Master Plan. Interventions around the Master Plan are closely tied to judicial interventions and the use of RTI. Given the “quasi-legal” status of residents of “upwardly mobile” and revenue layout RWAs, they seldom appear to make use of such tools.

Elite RWAs have also taken the judicial route on quite a few issues, the Koramangala PIL, being the more well known. Even when the courts give them a favourable judgment, as they are increasingly doing in recent years (Baviskar 2002; Aurobindoo 2005), it does not make much difference to what happens on the ground.<sup>8</sup> Elite RWAs have therefore articulated the need for support from a broader spectrum of groups particularly in controversial matters like “encroachments” on land. RWAs in non-elite areas do not typically report use of the judicial route although some do approach the Lok Ayukta to report stalled ward works. RTI, the new tool for improved governance, seems to be extensively used by elite and upwardly mobile RWAs in core city areas but less so by revenue layout RWAs in peripheral areas. The RTI is used to get information on a number of activities ranging from monitoring violations and encroachments to enquiring the status of the JNNURM to put pressure on government.

In recent years there is growing consensus within different sections of the middle class that they can only wield sustained influence over their neighbourhoods if there is electoral reform although it is to be noted that for them electoral reform constitutes a range of meanings. Elite RWAs articulate that the present system of electoral democracy could be made to deliver by limiting the role of the corporator while including a clear role for civil society groups. A member explains that the corporator cannot take a ward level decision on his own because the area sabhas (mandated under the Community Participation Law) and ward committees consisting of civil society representatives from the ward should be responsible for ward-level decisions just like the elected council of the corporation. This, they believe, could lead to greater administrative efficiency and transparency. Such beliefs go beyond what Zerah (2007) calls a “utilitarian” approach to solving neighbourhood problems as they are concerned with longer-term systemic reforms and not just the resolution of a particular local problem. Till date, however, they do not show signs of wanting to gain lobbying power with politicians by putting up candidates for elections as other non-elite RWAs are doing. This may perhaps be due to their realisation that they form a small minority in their neighbourhoods, leave alone the city at large.

While many upwardly mobile RWAs share a distrust of local politicians, they favour more interaction with them and possess more faith in the system of democratic elections. To achieve this they suggest getting more middle class people to vote and thus becoming more important “vote banks” to councillors, by campaigning for councillors based on certain issues and positions taken by them, and by putting up their own candidates for elections. One of these RWA candidates for corporation elections explained his motivation for contesting elections, “I want to stand on the issue

of ‘development’. They (residents) should support me on that and what I can do there. If I start getting involved in caste and these issues then even if I win, I’m not sure it is worth it” (interview dated 17 March 2007). The stand to put up candidates for elections by these RWAs seems to be a somewhat equivocal one as it represents a vote of confidence in the system of electoral politics albeit one that is qualified by moving away from the identitarian politics to one based on “development”. Representing yet another variation on the theme of bargaining with the corporator, several revenue layout RWAs say that they have threatened their corporators that they will put up their own candidates for elections if corporators do not deliver on their promises. This, they argue, is no idle threat because they boast that their federation counts within its fold a population of two lakhs.

## 5 Elite Capture or Elite Influence?

Our research reveals that there are limits to the representational character of middle class RWAs as well as the associational ability of citizens across neighbourhoods. Though many RWAs do have periodic elections to nominate office bearers, existing office bearers tend to retain their positions as there are few takers for these positions. Most of the more visible RWA activists tend to be retired professionals from elite backgrounds, with few women representatives. They are also marked by low participation levels and decisions are often taken by a small core membership. Some of them even see this lack of participation to be helpful in functioning more efficiently! Members of the new affluent middle class tend to rely more on private contractors for service delivery although their ability to imagine “world class” infrastructure projects appears to influence the direction of policymaking. To characterise RWAs as a representative agent of citizens making homogeneous claims on the state for services, as others argue (Tawa Lama-Rewal 2007), is therefore not entirely correct.

Associational ability across neighbourhoods is affected by weak ties within RWAs and conflicts of interest with local political networks. Community-driven initiatives for provisioning, hailed as good urban practices, are a case in point. An RWA in Indiranagar has been a forerunner in devising and implementing a model for decentralised garbage disposal and waste management to address the problem of overflowing bins. Members decided to initiate the garbage disposal system in a small way by drawing upon resident experts like engineers and bureaucrats, and then scale it up. The demonstration effect it had on neighbouring roads and layouts ensured a steady rise in the number of households joining in this initiative. Once a waste segregation system was in place, the RWA requested the corporation to provide some land for a compost facility. After several tussles over land, a compost facility was set up in the land allotted, and the compost generated was sold back to the residents at a rate of Rs 10/kg. This move received the support of senior corporation officials and was hailed as a model in decentralised waste management to be taken up in other parts of Bangalore.

Soon after this, in 2004-05, garbage collection was privatised by the corporation. Viewing such community initiatives as a challenge to their mode of operating besides denying them revenue from the ward, private contractors for garbage collection threatened

one of the RWA coordinators if the local composting and alternate collection was continued. The coordinator was uncertain how long the senior bureaucrat who had supported the association would continue in his present capacity. It was also around this time that there was resistance from some residents in an adjoining neighbourhood about paying a monthly fee for garbage collection claiming that they were already paying taxes for such services. These factors led to the RWA's decision to involve itself only in garbage collection which would then be handed over to the private contractor. By early 2007, the association had shrunk in size from around 1,000 to only 150 members. The coordinator could not draw strength from the RWA members to resist the threats from the garbage contractor but instead relied on personal connections with high-level bureaucrats. This initiative simultaneously reveals both the promise of such community self-provisioning efforts as well as the limits of such middle class activism when it comes into conflict with other interests rooted in local political networks.

While RWAs are more visible in the sphere of local public service delivery, they have not in general been successful in influencing bigger issues requiring policy or legislative changes. They also seem to be ineffective in spheres with strong interest groups which are under the control of politicians. Contests over access to land and who is "unauthorised" and how they should be penalised are cases in point. A number of RWAs have struggled to gain control over public land for uses like parks and playgrounds. A Koramangala RWA is currently working with the traffic police to earmark all areas under high tension wires in Koramangala for parking spaces or parks. At one of these earmarked parcels, however, they found that the councillor had allotted sites to various small business owners. The RWA immediately went to the police who pronounced this dangerous and thus managed to stop the allotment. This is a tussle that constantly erupts between RWAs and politicians who seek to take the land either for habitation for slum-dwellers or accumulation through real estate activity. Going by our fieldwork, RWAs have tended to lose the struggle when the contested land stood to personally benefit wealthy and well connected actors. If, however, public land has been occupied by poor groups and supported by councillors for the purpose of getting votes, RWAs have been more successful in ousting them, particularly if they forge partnerships with government officials.

Efforts to dispossess poor groups are given impetus by recent "reform" initiatives implemented in the name of "urban renewal", "decongestion" or "beautification" (Baviskar 2002; Fernandes 2004; Benjamin 2007). Bureaucrats and non-elected officials

often play an important role in supporting these efforts. RWAs, elite RWAs in particular, have no doubt played an important role in creating acceptance around issues like paying user fees, highlighting the importance accruing to owning property and maintaining property values, and diverting attention from livelihood issues. Despite the greater importance ascribed to RWAs and public participation by the reform drive, actual changes on the ground remain elusive. While there is growing emphasis being laid on public consultations and citizen participation in urban reform processes launched across the country, this role seems to be largely cosmetic. Overall, middle class residents have limited expectations as to what they can achieve at city or policy levels and acknowledge their influence to be confined to the "local" in terms of issues, geography and influence.

Senior bureaucrats, in turn, openly talk of the difficulties in operationalising reforms like the Community Participation Law and the resistance they will face from the political class. Middle class collective action courts growing resistance from local politicians due to their increased vigilance against "encroachments" of public land, actions that are primarily undertaken to defend the (use) value of their properties. Such contests are only likely to increase and become more divisive in the future given the emerging trend of reforms increasing centralisation of decision-making, notably bypassing elected councils and corporators but giving a controlled and limited role to RWAs.

Despite little evidence of RWAs influencing the state, there is unmistakable convergence of interests and agendas, towards the new rule of property and capital. Viewed in this light the increasing visibility of RWAs appears to be created by the media and by policy discourses that seek an organised middle class constituency of property-owning people to position as "stakeholders" in the new trends of urban reforms. Several factors make this situation even more contingent and complicated. Even in terms of "legality", our earlier discussions reveal that there are variations across different segments of the middle class (also Coelho and Venkat, this issue). With the advent of Greater Bangalore, the city is now undergoing processes of change in political structure and power relationships. For instance, there will be fewer councillors in the city council but each of them will represent far more people, in effect giving them powers almost similar to that of MLAs. Whether the changes brought in by reforms will strengthen the relative bargaining position of RWAs vis-à-vis councillors is therefore not clear. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the multiplicity of middle class mobilisations and motivations to understand how public service delivery gets shaped by their actions.

## NOTES

- 1 Additionally, a Community Participation Fund has been designed to encourage community-based participation in urban governance.
- 2 In the now well known distinction, Chatterjee argues that citizenship is confined to the middle class who enjoy the status of the legal and are eligible to make claims on the state on the basis of rights. But to large numbers who occupy space illegally and hence not in a position to make claims on the basis of citizenship, claim making is primarily through politics (2001).
- 3 Bangalore's slum population at less than 20%

in 1991 is the lowest of the metropolitan cities (Schenk 2001: 30).

- 4 "Most software engineers and other young professionals prefer to buy flats in the large, upscale, self-contained apartment complexes that have sprung up around the city specifically to cater to this class. They find living in such enclaves convenient because services such as security, maintenance, recreation and domestic help are provided or readily available. ... In addition, the standard layout of the flats in these complexes is producing a new model of middle class living that is very different from the pattern of small

independent bungalows found in Bangalore's "revenue layouts" favoured by the older generation of the middle and lower middle classes" (Upadhyaya 2008: 68).

- 5 In January 2007 the government of Karnataka created the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) or Greater Bangalore Municipal Corporation by annexing the eight urban local governments around the existing city corporation. The peripheral areas selected for the study now all fall within the BBMP. The five sample areas within the city include two older and two newer residential areas, and a commercial neighbourhood. The sample areas



- from the peripheries represent two planned and one organically developing village neighbourhood.
- 6 For a more detailed description and analysis of the GBWASP see Ranganathan et al forthcoming.
  - 7 Nilekani is a top official with Infosys, the well-known software firm in Bangalore.
  - 8 Contradicting the court judgment, the BDA Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP), approved in August 2007, designated the whole of Koramangala as "mixed use".

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