

## Book Review

**Supriya RoyChowdhury (2021) *City of Shadows: Slums and Informal Work in Bangalore* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). ISBN 9781009003766, 1009003763. 200 pp. US\$78.62 (hardcover); US\$73.13 (ebook)**

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Packed with new findings about India's urban development, this book advances our understanding of informal work and informal workers. Although not a long book, at just over 200 pages, it offers very detailed empirical evidence and, importantly, contains a new insight about the nature of spatial and class-based dynamics in different urban slums, which I explain below.

As the sub-title suggests, the book is about slums and informal work in Bangalore (Bengaluru), India's fourth most populous city and the local version of Silicon Valley (p. 14). Beneath such glamour are the slums that constitute the city's underbelly. Although smaller proportionally than other large Indian cities, Bangalore's slums have grown rapidly.

The book is structured into nine chapters, including the Introduction, which asks what should be "an appropriate conceptual framework for imagining urban marginalities?" (p. 1), among other questions. The exclusion of slum-dwellers is particularly confronting in Bangalore, given the city's apparent success, raising the critical question: "[What] happens to the poor in a city that is rapidly growing rich?" (p. 6). Chapters 2 and 3 provide conceptual overviews of workers, the welfare state, and informality. Chapter 4 offers a nice summary of Bangalore's political economy. Chapters 5 to 8 offer detailed empirical accounts, which represent the core of the book's contribution.

Chapter 5 looks at "new slums" on the city's urban outskirts where people have lived, on average, for the past decade. It offers a detailed descriptive account of four slums, based on household surveys and focus groups. The chapter details low wages, low levels of literacy, and marginalisation from labour markets that present even a slim chance of improving living standards. Electricity, running water and basic sanitation are typically absent. Poor access to school education further entrenches intergenerational disadvantage. Residents were typically reluctant to admit poor school attendance, representing a social stigma among parents that is handled with great skill and empathy by the author. In terms of formal politics, party apparatchiks typically ignore slum-dwellers outside elections.

Chapter 6 looks at "old slums" in the inner city, which have existed for decades, some for up to 70 years. Their longevity is reflected in a semi-formal status as 'notified slums', meaning that government agencies are responsible for the provision of at least some basic amenities. Again, this chapter is impressively detailed, drawing data from a study of 300 households across six slums in the city's central commercial hub. An interesting finding is the significant economic inequality *within* slum communities, which house workers ranging from skilled tradespeople (electricians, plumbers, welders, and so on) to much lower-paid, lower-status workers employed as headload bearers,

ragpickers and so on.

Based on ethnographic observations from six slums, Chapter 7 explores state projects of urban redevelopment and housing relocation, finding that such projects fail to remedy inadequate property rights and, typically, do not improve quality of life. Chapter 8 shifts the book's focus from housing to the workplace via a study of women working in garment factories. Like new slum residents, most garment workers are relatively recent migrants from far-flung regions. Few aspire to remain; most wish to earn enough to return to their home villages, the chapter conveys. Importantly, their precarity reflects a pattern of migration as a "coordinated set of activities" among the state, garment manufacturers and labour market intermediaries (p. 190). In the face of employer hostility and low membership density, unions tend to focus on workplace-scale issues and lack a broader political *raison d'être*. The author concludes, pessimistically, that these workers are "footloose" (p. 197) – a phrase made famous among scholars of Indian workers via Breman (1996)—and, alas, *powerless* (p. 198).

Based upon this wealth of evidence, the author has much to say about contemporary debates. The book quietly defends the idea of informal work, despite some calls to dump the concept (Standing, 2014). Against tendencies to emphasise micro-entrepreneurship, self-employment and petty commodity production, or even the allegedly "non-capitalist" nature of informal work (Sanyal, 2007), she emphasises the dominant role of capitalist waged work *inside* the informal economy. Proletarianisation and informalisation are not mutually contradictory but *complementary* processes, the book suggests. The author is also sceptical about arguments to displace welfare's ties to employment status in favour of general models of social insurance detached from the workplace. The book thus adds to the intellectual challenge posed by "classes of labour" (Bernstein, 2010), and similar conceptual approaches.

The book is a little reserved in advancing this argument—it is not until the concluding chapter that one understands more fully where the author stands. Nevertheless, the book's conclusions point to the world-historic challenge of reconciling mass (but differentiated) proletarianisation with the severely withered state of formal labour politics (Chapter 8).

But the truly significant contribution of this book is its emphasis empirically on differentiation among slum populations in terms of spatiality and temporality, as well as social class, occupational status, caste and ethno-linguistic origin. Far from slum dwellers and informal workers representing a homogenous bloc of interests and experiences, the book's key finding is the distinction between new slums in the urban fringe, populated by relatively recent migrants who maintain social ties to rural villages as well as many low-caste workers employed in construction, and old slums in the urban core, which are populated by long-term residents in a greater variety of occupational groups.

This raises questions of class differentiation among informal workers which should be taken seriously by anyone studying work and economic development in poor countries. Methodologically, the book's comparison of slums within the same city is highly instructive. Brimming with empirical insights, this little gem of a book should be read carefully by scholars and students of labour movements in India and beyond.

## References

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- Sanyal, K. (2007) *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive accumulation, governmentality and postcolonial capitalism*. London: Routledge.

Standing, G. (2014) Understanding the precariat through labour and work. *Development and Change* 45(5): 963-980.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

TOM BARNES is a sociologist at Australian Catholic University (ACU). His research focuses on precarious work, labour regimes and labour markets. He is the author of *Informal Labour in Urban India: Three Cities, Three Journeys* (Routledge, 2015) and *Making Cars in the New India: Industry, Precarity & Informality* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). [Email: [tom.barnes@acu.edu.au](mailto:tom.barnes@acu.edu.au)] [ORCID id: [0000-0002-3768-7905](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3768-7905)]