

PRECARITY AS INFRASTRUCTURAL ANXIETY

To what extent and how might this proposition be a useful lens through which to understand contemporary Indian society and politics?

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INTRODUCTION

For McFarlane, drawing on Simone (2004), 'an infrastructure is not a rigid or obdurate set of materials, but a labour-intensive, heavily gendered, unpredictable and often desperate attempt to create or maintain metabolic safety and dignity' (McFarlane, 2009, 4). Precarity as infrastructural anxiety refers in this double sense then to precarity as a lived and kinaesthetic structure of feeling and precarity as an unpredictable and intensive process of negotiating and cultivating everyday fields. This essay adopts a Bourdieuan/Lefebvreian approach to the study of precarity as infrastructural anxiety in contemporary India. In this manner, I hope to draw together Bourdieu's focus on social fields with Lefebvre's on the everyday as a space of possibility in order to explore precarity as a complex lived, felt experience of anxiety and opportunity in the making. This approach is further scaffolded by insights from feminist political ecology. The essay is organized as follows.

In Section I, I explore the proposition as a useful lens through which to understand an emergent set of tendencies and shifting contexts affecting the everyday embodied experiences, practices and perceptions of the urban poor. In particular, I draw on Gidwani and Reddy's (2011) idea of 'eviscerating urbanisms'. *Precarity as infrastructural anxiety* in this sense provides a useful lens through which to interrogate the political economy of India and contemporary discourses of the Indian city surrounding sanitation inequality, open defecation, the criminalization of the poor and the role of state legislature and the judiciary in these metabolisms.

In Section II then I move toward a more fine-grained sociological analysis of the urban poor, informality and precarity as an infrastructural anxiety. In this sense, I explore the proposition as a useful lens through which to understand the cultural politics of the urban poor and the metabolic relations of contestation and collaboration that emerge vertically and horizontally between the Indian state, civil society and the informal economy. In particular, this section examines precarity as a kinaesthetic structure of feeling, delicately intersecting processes of individualization and the performance of young male masculinity, jugāad and prefigurative politics. Section II concludes in this respect briefly exploring the intersecting lines of gendered precarity and infrastructural anxiety affecting the everyday lives of women in India's informal economy. Section III concludes the essay as much holding together as holding open.

I. PRECARIY, INFORMALITY AND EVISCERATING URBANISM

The Two Ecologies

The proposition - *precarity as infrastructural anxiety* - in many senses emerges as a useful telescopic lens through which to understand the shifting political economy and ecology of the Indian city as it affects the everyday embodied experiences, practices and perceptions of the urban poor. For Gidwani and Reddy (2011), contemporary urban India is marked by a series of 'eviscerating urbanisms' : 'the proliferation of survival jobs (such as scavenging, waste-picking and household services, in the niches of the urban informal economy), new forms of patron-client relations, a strange geography of encounters and contact zones and the emergence of new 'informal moral economies' to compensate (imperfectly) for the post-development state' (Gidwani and Reddy, 2011, 7).

Gill (2009) traces these eviscerating urbanisms to a set of (infra)structural tendencies emerging in India since economic liberalization began in the 1990s: rapid urban-rural migration in search of employment, the growth of mega-cities and the attendant pressures on land and urban services bolstering the emergence of large, informal economies. As Chandrasekhar and Ghosh suggest, the deceleration in the growth of organized sector employment by the early 2000s in India led to a sharp decline in the employment elasticity of output resulting in jobless growth, accompanied by a rapid expansion of the informal sector (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2002)

For Benjamin the separation between the formal and informal sector as such produces two distinct ecology sets in the Indian city: the 'local economy' and 'corporate economy'. For Benjamin, the former is the 'space in which the mass of people dwell, very often in circumstances of insecure tenure, and to which they try to secure their livelihoods, mostly through insecure, informal employment.' The corporate economy, on the other hand, is the city space that is 'controlled by industrial, bureaucratic and IT sector elites, which increasingly is demarcated physically from the geographical areas of local economies' (Benjamin, 2000).

For Boo, insecure tenure in the local economy as such generates a sense of precarity as infrastructural anxieties toward the future. Boo recounts a conversation with an elderly man in an informal settlement on the outskirts of Mumbai International airport: "everybody in Annawadi talks like this - oh I will make my child a doctor, a lawyer and he will make us rich. It's vanity, nothing more. Your little boat goes west and you congratulate yourself, 'What a navigator I am!' And then the wind blows you east' (Boo, 2012, 73). For Roy, the two ecology sets of the Indian city are not in this sense static but on the wind, up in the air, atmospherically intersecting a broader political economy of urban revanchism, the bulldozer state, caste

politics, corruption and the urban development authorities 'empowered to exercise control over urban real estates in a way that often bypasses elected local bodies' (Roy, 2003, 18).

4

Precarity and the Everyday State

Thinking the precariousness of everyday life as infrastructural anxiety extends in this sense beyond providing a lens into India's broad-stroke political economy toward a finer-grained anthropology of the everyday state and society. The proposition in this respect provides a lens through which to interrogate several contemporary governmental and elite discourses in India surrounding sanitation inequality, open defecation, the criminalization of nuisance and the role of state legislature and the judiciary in these metabolisms. For Chatterjee, the Indian state, hamstrung by limited resources, operates in a peculiar mode. The state as such 'confronts a population of which the majority is de facto denied the full privilege of citizenship.' However, 'since the state cannot afford to address this population on uniform terms, it addresses itself serially and selectively to informal representations by excluded groups, on terms that are particularistic and exceptional rather than universal' (Chatterjee, 2004, 8). For McFarlane, these serial and selective modes of governmentality often hold a disruptive and punitive logic in which the urban poor are punished for their sanitation poverty and infrastructural inadequacy by the threat and reality of demolition, dispossession and resettlement.

McFarlane draws attention to a series of Cleanliness and Sanitation Byelaws which, legislated in 2006, introduced punitive measures against cooking, bathing, spitting, urinating and defecating in public space. For Baviskar (2003), these policed measures as such privilege 'the sensory experiences of the urban middle-classes and elites, eras[ing] the sensory experiences of the urban poor [and] pitting a basic human need against the right to a clean and sanitary urban environment (McFarlane, 2009, 17). For Gidwani and Reddy (2011), a sense of caste-ism backgrounds the Byelaws in their association of the informal settlement with pollution, dirt and untouchability. The metabolisation of precarity in this sense is produced in 'a shifting context of land economies and gentrification, (il)legality and dispossession, garbage, recycling, labour, water politics, commoditization and cultural politics', in which the everyday state and certain segments of civil society are never far from being instrumentally implicated (Desai, McFarlane and Graham, 2012, 3).

For Jeffrey then, there is a broader ontological and ethical tension in these Marxian political economy accounts. As such, by elucidating an emergent set of tendencies or governmentalities in Indian society and politics and framing these by their effects on the poor, a rather over-simplified and mechanistic opposition emerges between a bourgeois and state elite, on the one hand, and a 'public culture' (Gupta, 1995), 'political society' (Chatterjee, 2004) or arena of 'deep democracy' on the other.

In this sense, the arguments of Gidwani and Reddy, Chatterjee and Baviskar might be tempered by an anthropology and critical social geography that, rather than 'lumping the poor together as the recipients of uneven urban rights and governance', recognises the agency, micro-politics and potential for resistance, invention and imagination by different individuals acting within and cultivating a diverse array of social infrastructures (Truelove, 2011, 9). In this respect, thinking precarity as infrastructural anxiety emerges as a productive lens and way of linking the cultural politics of the urban poor with everyday state narratives of planning and citizenship, civil society, contention and collaboration.

II. PRECARIETY AS INFRASTRUCTURAL ANXIETY

A Quiet Politics

For McFarlane, in order to understand how individuals 'see the state' and cultivate fields of infrastructural uncertainty with regard to housing, education, healthcare facilities and service provision, a conceptual reformulation of the state is required. For Harriss-White (2004) then, the Indian everyday state is less a discrete or singular entity - as Chatterjee's formulation might imply - but rather a 'dispersed ecology of practices', constituted by a vast assemblage of brokers (*dalals*), advisers, political workers and contractors (*pradhans*). In this manner, precarity as a lived, felt experience of infrastructural anxieties is not articulated at a single point in time but emerges processually amidst a noisy, 'moving world of bodies, people, objects and ideas': legal rulings, municipal plans, policing practices (Jeffrey, 2010, 52). For Anand (2011), the way in which individuals negotiate with this vast assemblage of the everyday state is through what Asef Bayat (2010) calls a 'quiet politics' or 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary.'

For Anand, this quiet politics refers to ways in which individuals living in informal settlements cultivate relations with engineers, local politicians, brokers, plumbers and water-tank drivers to metabolise necessary infrastructures such as water pipes, hanging latrines and toilets. The provision of tenure security and basic services relies in this sense on a concatenation of patron-client relations and backroom concessions. For Desai et. al (2014), the quiet encroachment of the ordinary might be thought of in this way as a series of spatial and temporal improvisations through which the urban poor invest in uncertain, infrastructural futures. There is a popular saying in Hindi that circulates in informal settlements - '*shaitan peechhe ata hai, to bhagte hain*' (the devil is at our feet') - to refer to this breathless ecology of practices involved in securing tenure and services. For Boo what is more, this chronopolitics of infrastructural anxiety is distinctly visible:

'Time was precious to Annawadians [...] they had work at dawn, homes to clean, children to bathe, and above all water to get from the slum's trickle-taps before they went dry, which involved standing in line for hours. The municipality sent water through Annawadi faucets for ninety minutes in the morning and ninety minutes at night. Men from the *Shiv Sena* (the Hindu dominant, regional political party) had appropriated the taps, charging usage fees to their neighbors (Boo, 2012, 112).

McFarlane observes as such in a different context how a cultural politics of quiescence proceeds largely through patronage by the *Shiv Sena* whereby the delivery of services such as water taps is provided in exchange for votes. Chandra (2007) and Hansen (2001) explore the roles of *dadas*, *shakhas* (offices) and *panchayats* in patronage democracy whereby the *dada* embodies a 'masculine, assertive, often violent symbolic role as a local strongman whose clout lies in self made networks of loyalty rather than in institutionalised action' and whereby the *shakha* and *panchayat* provide informal spaces for the negotiation of complaints and requests.

For McFarlane however, a quiet politics of patronage payment often intersects broader tensions of anxiety and helplessness; as one Khotawadian resident disclosed: "[the shakha] is an office to buy votes" and to make money through "political adjustment [siphoning off money from development projects]" rather than listening and improving people's lives (McFarlane, 2009, 11). Of 'the wind that blows you east', there is a sense then that precarity is lived and felt as a moving constellation of anxieties and fears, marked by temporary moments of possibility or breakthrough in which uncertain provisions and infrastructures are attained or renegotiated. The lived experience of precarity, insecure tenure and informal politicking in this sense intercuts broader processes of political individualisation and performance.

A Precarious Politics: Prefiguration, Jugāad and Young Masculinity

For Jeffrey, Bourdieu's emphasis on the *habitus* forms a productive lens through which to understand the cultural politics of patronage. In Bourdieu's writing, the *habitus* refers to the micro-aspects of individuals' 'comportment, reflexes and taste' and to the unconscious aligning of the body 'in realistic relation to what is possible and therefore limited by power' (Bourdieu, 1984, 12). The quiet encroachment of the ordinary emerges in this sense as a 'practical anticipation of objective limits', an investment in seeing how the ongoing "succession of presents" that constitute everyday life might precipitate social and personal transformation in the future. Jeffrey is mindful in this sense to stress that the *habitus* and a 'practical anticipation of objective limits' often acquiesces rather than reconfigures patron-client relations and hierarchies in the informal settlement.

Precarity as infrastructural anxiety refers in this sense to precariousness as a lived experience of temporal anxiety toward the future (*bhavishya*), in which paradoxically the future can often mean nothing or feel like a closed roof. Jeffrey recalls how one young man considered the future as a vapid horizon: 'I have learnt from bitter experience that you cannot rely on politicians' promises. You simply have to do your own work (*'kaam karna hai'*) ... to think about what is going to happen 'from now on' (*'age chalkar'*). For Cross (2009) in this sense, imagining the future as a vapid horizon strains at the temporal ruptures between the two ecologies of the Indian city, whereby for the corporate and formalised economy:

the post-liberalisation era in India saw shifts in the temporal language of Indian politics, with 'ultimate origins' and 'distant horizons' (Guyer, 2007) coming to have a heightened importance in political discourse and public culture. On the one hand a saffron wave of Hindu nationalism invoked ancient history and laid claim to the idea of a sovereign, disciplined national culture that was rooted in a superior, archaic Hindu past (Hansen, 1999). At the same time India's economic reformers invoked vistas of the far-off future (Cross, 2009, 15).

At the same time then, the *habitus* is not fixed but an evolving invention. For Jeffrey (2014), precarity as infrastructural anxiety toward the future in this sense is 'not only an expression of social suffering', or a debilitating structure of feeling but also something else, a certain cultural and political practice, a mode of self-fashioning and self-expression. The quiet encroachment of the ordinary in this sense intersects with the formation of spaces of possibility and individual, masculine subjectivities toward the state, civil society and informal economy.

Jeffrey observes the role of a folk culture of *jūgar* in the everyday informal activities and quiet politics of young men. *Jugār* or *jugāad* as such, a Hindi word meaning 'shrewd improvisation' or resourcefulness in the present moment, refers to a series of improvisatory tactics, games of anticipation and invention by which young men muscle in to the dispersed ecology of the everyday state and gain political favour. *Jūgar* in this sense (*'kaam karna hai'*) is imagined as a sort of *habitus*, something residing at a deep level within the body, 'like a spring capable of triggering certain innovations' (Jeffrey, 2010, 74). For young men, in this sense, *jugāad* or the capacity to perform *jugāad* emerges as a precarious politics of improvisatory twinning (of resources) and timing (of events). Cultivating a succession of presents, young men imagine the state in dual consciousness as a 'corrupt and craven set of institutions' but also a 'dispersed and workable arena' of opportunity (Jeffrey, 2010, 76).

For Jeffrey then, there is a clear tension between young male precarity as an individualised, reflexive experience of modernity and precarity as a shared, collectivised masculine anxiety with the potential to

energise cross-class and cross-caste mobilisation. What is more, the spatial and temporal dimensions of this tension manifest in varied forms of cultural politics and performance. Jeffrey as such delineates between a politics of quiescence, slow-burn and non-protest forms of organising and more visible cultural politics of protest, theatricality and state opposition. In this manner, thinking precarity as infrastructural anxiety provides a valuable lens through which to comprehend a set of emerging counter-tendencies in urban India for cross-class, cross-caste collaboration and mobilisation surrounding issues of access, perception and the broader re-imagining of the city's vital infrastructures. While I return to this aspect in the final section of this essay, precarity however is not simply a resolve of young men in India's informal settlements.

Precarity as Gendered Anxiety: Women, Violence and Sanitary Improvisation

In an ethnography of everyday life in Kerala, Binoy (2014) meets a young woman named Kala. For Kala, her everyday experience of precariousness is profoundly shaped by domestic violence and environmental degradation. Truelove in this sense observes how women's bodies are often caught up in differing degrees of gendered hardships, physical labour and public shame that are shaped by their situated position within families, communities and class groups in the city. For Corbridge et. al, 'large numbers of women and girls in India suffer significant disadvantage because of their sex or, more precisely, because of the way that local gender relations are constructed and intersect with broader axes of social difference such as class, caste, religion and age (Corbridge et. al, 2012, 226). What is more, the question of precarity and individual women's experiences of infrastructural anxiety is a growing area of contentious political debate in India as the "Kejriwal Hug" and the banning of the documentary *India's Daughter* well testify.

Corbridge et. al stress that, since at least the 'Sixth plan period (1980-85) in India, the government has implemented a number of measures to deal with the country's gender development and empowerment gaps': through the reservation of positions for women in *panchayati raj* institutions, the creation of All Women Police Stations, laws surrounding the Hindu Succession Act and the incentivising of female enrollment and stay in higher formal education (Corbridge et. al, 2012, 232). At the same time then, following the liberalisation of the Indian economy and the concomitant growth of the IT sector, Fuller and Narasimhan (2013) note the emergence of a clear strata of young urban professional women engaging in a cultural politics of social mobility, open aspiration, consumption and lifestyle choice, what Fuller and Narasimhan term, the 'new liberal Indian woman.' For Boo however, the experience of modernity for many women in India's urban informal settlements is more sobering. Precarity as an infrastructural anxiety toward the future as such manifests in many of the conversations she has with a young woman called Meena:

Everything on television announced a new and better India for women. Her [Meena's] favourite Tamil soap opera was about an educated single girl who worked in an office. In her favourite commercials, a South Indian movie siren named Asin was recommending, along with Mirinda orange soda, more fun, a little wildness. This new India of feisty, convention-defying women wasn't a place Meena knew how to get to. Maybe Manju would get there, with her college degree. Meena couldn't say, not knowing any woman who had finished college. But watching the soap operas and Mirinda commercials, she sometimes felt her own life to be a husk of an existence (Boo, 2012, 109).

For Truelove (2011) and McFarlane (2012), this lived and felt experience of precarity as the husk of an existence is in this sense profoundly temporal, a sense of limbo, disorientation, detachment, loosened on a wind that blows you east when everything else seems to be going west. For Truelove, what is more, precarity for women in India's informal settlements intersects a series of spatiotemporal insecurities and infrastructural anxieties surrounding daily sanitation, cultural taboo and the threat of male violence. Truelove as such notes in an informal settlement in Delhi, the vulnerable, risky and precarious daily rhythms of open defecation:

'Women recount stories of harassment, abduction, and rape, while traveling to closer (but less protected) sanitation points. [What is more] because stomach illnesses are quite common (one woman estimated that most adults in the slum get diarrhea once a month), these women must discipline their bodies around a lack of accessible and private sanitation, or face public shame, humiliation and embarrassment' (Truelove, 2011, 17).

Truelove observes how many women rise at 4:45 am, and begin a half hour early morning walk to find a relatively uninhabited forest area to urinate and defecate in. Precarity as infrastructural anxiety metabolises in this sense as a heavily gendered, labour-intensive and unpredictable process of negotiating and cultivating everyday fields and social, sanitation infrastructures. Yet, for all the sobering elements of Truelove's account, there are as equally spaces of possibility, hope and the potential for a re-envisioning cultural politics.

III. PROPOSITION-POTENTIAL || OPEN-ENDING

A Fulcrum and a Lens

For Manning, a proposition is a propulsion, propulsing the event 'toward what it can do, effecting the concrescence of an actual occasion' (Manning, 2009, 17). *Precarity as infrastructural anxiety* in this sense is more than a lens through which to understand contemporary Indian society and politics, it is a fulcrum. The

role of a critical social geography and anthropology in this way is a distinct machining of concepts that move and potentialise change and social transformation in the everyday lifeworld. For McFarlane as such, contemporary India is already moving with a series of counter-tendencies and collaborations inventively challenging and re-imagining the city's vital infrastructures.

In Mumbai, the *Right to Pee* movement involving a collection of over thirty groups, campaigns for the existing male-biased public sanitation infrastructure to be upgraded. Two such groups the *Mahila Milan*, an organisation of pavement-dwelling women and the *Ghar Bachao Ghar Banao Andolan* (a housing rights movement) pool together resources to construct community toilets and secure legal tenure. Wax (2009) then similarly notes in northwestern India the '*No Loo? No I do!*' campaign of young women cultivating social infrastructures through the vital, temporal conjuncture of marriage.

More broadly then, McFarlane notes the emergence of the *Community Led Total Sanitation* (CLTS) programme as part of a growing focus on 'participatory' approaches to sanitation, reacting to a previous period of predominantly top-down, one-size-fits-all engineering-based solutions (Black and Fawcett, 2008). A key strength of the CLTS in this respect, McFarlane (2012) writes, is that it builds toward sanitation solutions directly from everyday experience. What is more, a series of important documentaries have emerged in recent years concerning issues of precarity, infrastructural inequality and accountability: *Q2P* (Vohra, 2006) for one, unravels the intersecting lines of class, caste and gender in India's cities; *India's Daughter*, the intersections of patriarchy, violence and the judiciary; *Lifelines* (Dyson, 2014) then and the interweavings beyond the city of roads, cables and unemployed anxieties.

The Fluid Ecologies

For Heller (2001), India today then might be conceptualised through the increasing surface area of the state, with broader pressures and movement concerning the environment, transparency and accountable governance. Most notably in this sense, the *Anna Hazare* movement and the election of Arvind Kejriwal as Chief minister of Delhi trace a growing urgency toward developing transparent and secure social infrastructures in India's cities. The *Times of India* as such tracing Kejriwal's electoral victory note the pressures it places on Modi's government to acknowledge infrastructure, women's security and the two ecologies of the city:

'It must not escape BJP's [*Bharatiya Janata Party*] notice this time that liberal issues do matter for the upwardly mobile. Persistently toxic vilification of minorities by BJP figures and ideological affiliates, saffronisation of education instead of preparing the young for a globalised

workplace and loony rhetoric about ancient science and reproductive obligations of women are all real turn offs for large sections of the urban middle class' (The Times of India, 2015).

What is noticeable in this sense, is that a series of emerging counter-tendencies in urban India fluidly present a sense of cross-class, cross-caste collaboration and mobilisation surrounding issues of access, perception and the transparent re-imagining of social infrastructures. For Jeffrey and Dyson (2014) furthermore, there is a sense that it is not only large sections of the urban middle class per se but young people engaging in generative, infrastructural politics. In India, there is a saying that youth are 'sara-sere': fruit that are almost ripe, a little green, 'khyogtong' (courageous), 'storophad' (bold) and 'khyongpo' (hard-headed, stubborn). In this manner, thinking precarity as infrastructural anxiety provides a valuable lens and fulcrum through which to move away from overtly simplified or mechanistic oppositions between the state, civil society and informal economy. The metabolisation of precarity in this sense is as much generated in shifting contexts as fluid ecologies wherein games of anticipation and patience, micro-politics, 'timepass', quiescence, imagination, prefiguration, protest and non-protest are relationally constructed between individuals - "pavement dwellers", informal workers, *dalals*, *pradhans*, politicians, civil society campaigners and foreign aid workers.

Politics in this sense is movement, relation, gravity, constellating toward the event of infrastructure as a feeling, a negotiation, a cultivation. As equally then, Desai et. al re-alloy this relational ontology of Indian society and politics to a critical realist perspective. In a country where '42 children die each hour due to inadequate sanitation (Kar, 2012), yet the central Indian state spends only 0.2% of GDP on it' (Desai et. al, 2012), and where urban spaces of poverty and informality are growingly marginalised and decoupled from imaginaries of large, public infrastructure projects, precarity is a very real and stark statistic of social, economic and environmental inequality in India today.

Toward an Opening

This essay has argued that the proposition - *precarity as infrastructural anxiety* - provides a valuable lens and fulcrum through which to understand contemporary Indian society and politics. In this sense, it draws firmly on a Bourdieuan/Lefebvrian approach to examine precarity as a complex lived, felt experience of anxiety and opportunity in the making. At the same time then, nothing floats out of nowhere. This essay adjoins a vibrant constellation of inter- and intra-disciplinary research already crossing social, cultural and critical geographies in the study of infrastructures, inequalities and cultural politics. In this respect, the proposition - *precarity as infrastructural anxiety* - might be cast further afield and comparatively for instance: toward precarity in the UK as austerity weighs on zero-hour contracts and a 'predictably unpredictable' post-fordist,

post-welfare future (Southwood, 2011). The role of a critical social geography and anthropology in this respect is as much a matter of holding together worlds as opening them up. Where propositions = propulsions. *Precarity as infrastructural anxiety* in this sense machines an opening, fulcrum and lens.

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