

**PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE IN AN ERA OF ECONOMIC REFORMS:
UNDERSTANDING THE RISE OF ‘NEW POLITICS’ AND
INDIAN MIDDLE-CLASS ACTIVISM**

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ABSTRACT

With the introduction of economic reforms in the early 1990s and a greater integration of the Indian economy into the global markets, there has been an increasing strategic importance of cities from an economic, political, and demographic perspective. This has led to the promotion of decentralization governance policies as part of the reform triptych ‘decentralization-privatization-participation’. In India, this is apparent in the landmark 74th Constitutional Amendment Act on urban local self-governance. In this paper, we shall attempt to examine how this evolving shift towards cities as economic and decision-making actors has led to the rearticulation of claims and a renewed form of mobilization of urban dwellers. However, many scholars have emphasized that instead of a more egalitarian imagination of citizenship this has created gentrified channels of participation by the introduction of elite discourses and strategies by the Indian middle class. This has been increasingly located within the realm of ‘new politics’, which has come to define forms of governmentality of the post-liberalization state. This paper aims to investigate the impact of middle-class activism on local governance by understanding the contextual factors leading to the emergence of Resident Welfare Associations (henceforth referred to as RWAs) and umbrella RWA organizations in Delhi, and how they have influenced various public policy outcomes at the local and state level. Although these mobilizations are rooted in the local, certain generalizations can be culled from it as neighborhood associations are on the rise in all large cities in India. By examining the spatial politics and contestations located in ‘new politics’, it is argued that an analysis of the political practices of the new Indian middle class deepens our understanding of the political dynamics of economic reform in contemporary India. This also provides us with an analytical frame to understand citizen negotiations with the state, market and the civil society in the backdrop of newer cultural and political economies of liberalization. By undertaking an analysis of participatory urban governance schemes such as Bhagidari and Mohalla Sabhas, this paper would also attempt to investigate the transformations that have taken place in local democratic politics of Indian cities and questions of inclusion/exclusion located within it.

KEYWORDS: *Urban Development, Citizenship, Local Governance, Middle Class, Civil Society*