**Adam Michael Auerbach, *Demanding Development: The Politics of Public Goods Provision in India's Urban Slums*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, xvii + 235 pp., appendices, bibliography, index, $34.99 (paperback).**

US-trained political scientists are realizing belatedly that “patronage” and “clientelism” are not aberrations, but the norm in modern democracies. Since ordinary citizens are not abstract individuals of the kind presupposed by social contract theories and neoliberal economics, their participation in democratic politics depends on multifarious forms of mediation or brokerage. Socially-embedded women and men enter or participate in everyday politics worldwide in a hierarchical manner: some lead, others are led[[1]](#footnote-1). Democracy does not, in other words, imply equality. But it does not mean, as Adam Auerbach argues in this book, that poorer citizens in countries such as India are hapless victims of a top-down exploitative system.

*Demanding Development* is a study of political brokerage in squatter settlements or “slums” in two Indian cities, Bhopal and Jaipur. It is based on two years of fieldwork in these cities. Data from interviews, participant-observation, and surveys conducted in these low-income urban settlements propel the central claim of the book. Put plainly, Auerbach argues that more populous and ethnically diverse settlements enjoy more dense networks of political brokers and party workers than smaller and more homogenous settlements.

Political brokerage, and in turn, leadership via the avenues provided by political parties emerge organically from within the settlements: those who lead and those who are led live in the same slums, but the former commit to “social work” and receive compensation from their clients, i.e., votersas well as their patrons, i.e., elected representatives in state and national legislatures. Political brokerage means, above all, connecting voters to their democratic representatives. For those interested in such a career, political ambition breeds skill and experience.

Auerbach shows how, in these nested hierarchies of everyday democratic life, what matters most is the ability of community leaders to provide public goods, particularly better roads, streetlighting, garbage collection, and primary healthcare. Ethnic allegiances matter, but across caste, religious, and regional lines, getting the job done matters more. Of course, not all jobs can be done. There are, as Auerbach’s interviews and surveys reveal, limits to how much “development” can be demanded of elected representatives via party workers. Piped water and sewage systems, for example, require extensive capital expenditure by the state, and unless a neighborhood is blessed with one or both, a slum might need to live without them.

Subaltern claim-making in Indian cities is hardly new, of course. It is true that the 74th amendment to the Indian Constitution has created a new framework within which claims are articulated and channeled into the political system. Partha Chatterjee and his interlocutors have shown that “political society” in India and beyond is centered around a new politics of the poor[[2]](#footnote-2). Such politics may not be egalitarian in demanding public goods, denoted by *vikas* or “development,” but it can be effective. Indeed, it is precisely the effectiveness of hierarchical politics among the poor that allow large-scale infrastructure upgrades to be postponed, sometimes indefinitely, until funds materialize. There is a curious paradox here: efficacious grassroots democracy, marked by competition and hierarchy, might coexist with a dysfunctional macro-politics rooted in cozy relations between big business and elected politicians[[3]](#footnote-3). This paradox could have been explored in this book, particularly in the light of the work of the heterodox economist Kalyan Sanyal on the costs of urban informality[[4]](#footnote-4), but Auerbach limits himself to a narrower micro-political analysis. At this level of analysis, only democratic demands are visible, some of which are easier than others to meet.

Slums serviced by a dense network of political brokers and party workers are also, of course, sites of political violence. From Paul Brass via Thomas Blom Hansen to Ward Berenschot, we have learned much about the local roots of communal violence in cities and towns across North India[[5]](#footnote-5). Auerbach fails to consider this dimension of grassroots democracy in Indian cities. Might the striking support for the BJP and RSS in, say, the slums of Bhopal tell us something about the election of (Sadhvi) Pragya Singh Thakur from this parliamentary constituency? Do the everyday practices of demanding development in slums also lead to demands for autocratic, centralized leadership? Could grassroots democracy and everyday authoritarianism have the same social bases?

Anthropologists and sociologists studying urban politics in India are unlikely to be surprised by the findings of *Demanding Development*. In fact, the book might be read as a translation of the work done by a generation of urban researchers into the language of American political science. This is a language of measurement and quantification of social and political processes explicated by other social scientists. But there is also banality at play here. Is it really puzzling that small squatter settlements have fewer political brokers than larger ones? Or that ethnic homogeneity in slums, a rarity in itself, is associated statistically with a low density of party workers? To be fair, Auerbach is scrupulous in acknowledging his debt to prior scholarship in the form of extensive notes. Such acknowledgements, however, reveal how far the novelty of academic work rests on the disciplinary framework within which it is constructed.

In sum, this study of slum politics in two north Indian state capitals builds on and validates existing scholarship on urban politics in South Asia and, indeed, Latin America. It is propelled by interviews with political brokers in slums, who narrate their work-a-day routines in detail. The poor residents of these urban settlements, by contrast, appear as statistical aggregates and averages. If Indian politics grants a modicum of voice to the poor without the agency to upset the entire applecart, American political science now seems to grant the poor the agency to shuffle patrons and brokers without the voice to articulate why they do what they do. Accordingly, the urban poor in contemporary India and elsewhere must seemingly settle for a strategic politics of survival vis-à-vis the crumbs offered by democratic politics.

*© Uday Chandra*

*Georgetown University, Qatar*

[*uc17@georgetown.edu*](mailto:uc17@georgetown.edu)

1. Anastasia Piliavsky (ed.), *Patronage as Politics in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.; see also Ajay Gudavarthy (ed.), *Re-framing Democracy and Agency in India: Interrogating Political Society* (New Delhi: Anthem Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Christophe Jaffrelot, Atul Kohli, and Kanta Murali (eds.), *Business and Politics in India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kalyan Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-Colonial Capitalism*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997; Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001; Ward Berenschot, *Riot Politics: Hindu-Muslim Violence and the Indian State*. London: Hurst & Co., 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)