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The Poor and the Objectionable: Habitat Negotiations in and around Chennai

Karen Coelho

Madras Institute of Development Studies

Nithya Raman

Centre for Development Finance

As the slogan of a “slum-free Chennai” has changed in meaning from the in-situ improvement drives of the 1970s and 80s to relocation in urban fringe settlements in the 1990s and beyond, the politics of the urban poor have undergone significant and often tandem transformations. The concerted anti-evictions struggles of the 1980s have given way to a more conflicted, competitive and complicit set of mobilizations in slums, shaped in part by the exigencies of negotiating access to the relocation coupon. As waterways restoration and eco-park projects create new categories and ever expanding cohorts of “objectionable” inhabitants of the city, the relocation coupon becomes an increasingly restricted and conditioned object of aspiration. Slum-dwellers poised in precarious settlements within the city craft their own strategies to present themselves as “deserving” of this scarcified ticket, including by setting fire to their homes. Yet the resettlement sites, almost invariably sited in floodplains, are often more “objectionable” both to their inhabitants and to the local ecologies of water and drainage than the river/canal margins or other liminal sites that they previously inhabited. This paper explores the terms through which inhabitants of urban slums define, negotiate and evaluate their (highly constrained) habitat options. How do these new sites of secure tenure, insecure livelihoods, poor infrastructure and fragile ecology figure in their aspirations of urban living? How are the trade-offs defined and valued?

The paper also explores the new social geographies of caste, community, danger, deserving and citizenship that are inscribed by the evolving politics of peri-urban ghetto relocations of poor city dwellers.