Agency and autonomy at the margins of the modern Indian state

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Migrants and Machine Politics: How India's Urban Poor Seek Representation and Responsiveness. By Adam Michael Auerbach and Tariq Thachil. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. 288p.

Resistance as Negotiation: Making States and Tribes in the Margins of Modern India. By Uday Chandra. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024. 340p.

Insurgency in India's Northeast: Identity Formation, Postcolonial Nation/State-Building, and Secessionist Resistance. By Jugdep S. Chima and Pahi Saikia. New York: Routledge, 2024. 168p.

India's Bangladesh Problem: The Marginalization of Bengali Muslims in Neoliberal Times. By Navine Murshid. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 287p.

Modern India is a political creation. The citizens of the world's most populous country speak 100 languages, practice eight major religions, and belong to over 700 tribal groups and thousands of castes. The challenge of democratically representing such a range of interests is compounded by deep material scarcity and striking economic and social inequality.

It is thus no surprise that some citizens are left out of India's democratic project. Many lack access to basic services like water, electricity, and sanitation (e.g., see Aklin, Michaël, Chao-Yo Cheng, and Johannes Urpelainen, "Inequality in Policy Implementation: Caste and Electrification in Rural India," *Journal of Public Policy* 41 (2), 2021), and discrimination on the basis of caste and religion is common (Ashwini Deshpande, *The Grammar of Caste: Economic Discrimination in Contemporary India*, 2011). These persistent patterns raise important questions about the different experiences of marginalization, how different groups go about demanding better conditions, and what remains to be done to achieve equality.

Four new books on organization and identity at the subnational level provide useful insights. The first two featured here focus on migrants. In *India's Bangladesh Problem* (2023), Navine Murshid exposes the plight of Bengali Muslims living at the border with Bangladesh and how they continue to be marginalized in an era of open borders and free trade. In *Migrants and Machine Politics* (2023), Adam Auerbach and Tariq Thachil draw our attention to rural-urban migrants in Bhopal and Jaipur, illustrating how local organization and entrepreneurial leadership can afford these citizens an unexpected degree of agency and power in local politics. The latter two books examine demands for autonomy. In *Resistance as Negotiation* (2024), Uday Chandra unearths the history of tribal rebellions in Jharkhand, arguing that they can be interpreted as acts of claim-making that created the contours of the modern state. In *Insurgency in India's Northeast* (2024), Jugdep Chima and Pahi Saikia study the role of identity in secessionist demands, highlighting how postcolonial policies may have created the very group identities through which these demands are made.

Together, these books generate surprising revelations about the agency and autonomy of marginalized groups in modern India. First, they show the powerful role that organizing can play in exacting material resources and political concessions from the state, revealing how the process of accommodating diversity unfolds. At the same time, certain goals—particularly dignity and self-determination—may be more difficult to achieve through political organization alone. These books also highlight the importance of local leadership in any type of demand-

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making, indicating that successful organization must serve the interests of elites as well. Finally, each of the books represents impressive primary data collection, and they are valuable contributions to scholarship in modern India and illustrate the importance of case knowledge and field-based research in the region.

Agency and power among migrants

Murshid's *India's Bangladesh Problem* (2023) first seeks to identify the social and economic causes of group marginalization in modern-day India. She investigates the condition of ethnically Bengali Muslims, who may live in either Bangladesh or India, but whose lives in India are of particular interest. Muslims are among India's most marginalized groups, and their socioeconomic status continues to decline over time, even with respect to the scheduled castes and tribes (Sam Asher, Paul Novosad, and Charlie Rafkin, "Intergenerational Mobility in India: New Methods and Estimates across Time, Space, and Communities," 2021). This is particularly true in West Bengal, where Bengali Muslims constitute a large minority. While 22% of Muslims hold regular salaried jobs nationally, this figure is closer to 13% in West Bengal. The districts where Muslims form the majority, moreover, can have over double the poverty rates of others in the state (Ashin Chakraborty, "Overpromising and Underdelivering: The Reality of West Bengal Muslims Under TMC Rule," *The Wire*, April 20, 2024). Why do Bengali Muslims fare so poorly, and why hasn't their lot improved over time?

Murshid argues Bengali Muslims are socially excluded because they are and have historically been seen as inferior —by colonizers, by employers, by the state, and even by other citizens. According to Murshid, this identity-based hierarchy originates in "neoliberal" policies emphasizing free markets for labor and goods at the border. The Bangladeshi government's strong support for worker migration to India combined with weak labor protections at home means those on the eastern side of the border often travel to India to find work, and they may be willing to work for less than Indian citizens. Over time, these workers suffer from a stigma attached to being poor migrants from a poor country who are willing to do low wage labor. In recent years, they have suffered doubly due to the increased political and cultural marginalization of Muslims throughout India.

Murshid supports this argument with historical analysis and a wealth of ethnographic research conducted in Assam and West Bengal. The comparison between these two regions highlights the different dynamics of marginalization for Bengali Muslims in either state. Assam has historically been marked by strong xenophobia against Muslims, and riots involving Bengali Muslims have killed thousands and displaced over a million since 1983. Murshid argues that this is likely because political sentiment is easily mobilized against this group, as they constitute a perceived threat to both economic opportunity and Assamese nationalism. In West Bengal, however, Bengali Muslims typically live in poor rural parts of the state. They remain trapped in poverty with limited opportunities to improve their economic or social status, as they are often rationed out of employment opportunities, particularly if they do not speak English or Hindi.

The most compelling parts of the book are based on interviews conducted with a broad swathe of actors: border guards, Bangladeshi tourists, shopkeepers, employees, informal laborers, traders, mothers, and many others. A highlight is a set of interviews with citizens living in a village at the border—the precarity of everyday life means Hindus and Muslims rather must rely on each other. Despite the lack of social power on the part of Bengali Muslims, these interviews suggest the possibility for improved social mobility for marginalized groups in cases where circumstances necessitate cooperation among different groups.

Auerbach and Thachil detail one such circumstance in *Migrants and Machine Politics* (2023) and show how cooperation can eventually lead to agency, even among those presumed powerless. Their study focuses on citizens who move from rural to urban areas in search of work, for marriage or familial reasons, or due to displacement. Approximately 35% of all urban residents were migrants as of 2020–2021(Kulvinder Singh, "How India Moves: Understanding Patterns of Migration within the Country," Centre for Economic Data & Analysis, Ashoka University, 2024), and they tend to be among the poorest. They often live in informal settlements ("slums") characterized by weak property rights and threats of eviction, poor public services, and substandard housing construction.

Yet these citizens and settlements are part of a competitive electoral environment within which they can express their demands. Given Murshid's argument, a reader might assume that the low-status jobs and stigmatized living conditions of these urban residents would lead them to be seen as inferior. Yet informal settlements are densely populated and frequently seen as "vote banks" in elections (Mary Breeding, "The Micro-Politics of Vote Banks in Karnataka," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46 (14), 2011). Migrants and other citizens living in informal settlements can exert their leverage to make demands of politicians.

Specifically, they can select brokers who lobby political patrons on their behalf. First, the authors show how brokers are chosen, arguing that citizens will prioritize the brokers who they believe to be effective and securing resources and will, in turn, channel resources to citizens like them. In practice, this means citizens are likely to prefer educated brokers who are of the same caste or religion. The brokers themselves are also strategic about which citizens they serve. These political entrepreneurs

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prioritize the requests of influential citizens who are likely to bolster their reputations, particularly long-time residents who are co-partisans and from the same state. Higher-level political patrons, who are often locally elected, also have an important say in selecting brokers. These politicians seek to convey their efficacy to their voters and therefore prioritize loyal co-partisan brokers who are effective in everyday service delivery. Finally, the authors also examine which types of requests are most likely to be answered. Again, the patrons' need to win elections directs them to favor demands coming from groups of citizens, particularly those mediated by co-partisan brokers. In sum, when making choices, citizens, brokers, and patrons prioritize working with the other actors they believe to be 1) efficacious and 2) likely to channel votes or resources *to them.*

Auerbach and Thachil support this argument with a rigorous study of the local politics of Jaipur and Bhopal. Each empirical chapter of their book puts forth a set of possible theories motivated by qualitative research, which are then tested and verified through survey experiments. For example, citizens' preferences for brokers are assessed through a conjoint experiment in which citizens choose among hypothetical brokers whose traits (e.g., ethnicity, education, and occupation) vary randomly, revealing preferences for co-ethnics, co-partisans, and educated brokers. In total, the authors conduct research surveying almost 4,000 informal settlement residents, 629 settlement leaders, and 343 party patrons.

Together, these books prompt numerous questions about when we should expect to see migrants successfully assert agency in local politics. Why do urban migrants gain representation, and why might Bengali Muslims not? Auerbach and Thachil suggest that citizens must be able to *organize and cooperate.* An informal settlement, after all, can only be a "vote bank" to which political patrons must respond if citizens vote together. If Bengali Muslims are not able to make organized demands, it could be because they are too sparsely distributed to form a cohesive group, or it could be that they have not yet found another group with which they share a sufficiently common interest around which to organize. In Assam, for example, competition over jobs may undermine efforts at cooperation with others. Any type of organization, moreover, requires some amount of capacity. It is possible that some groups are left out if they do not have the sufficient time, resources, or sense of social status to make demands.

Auerbach and Thachil also illustrate the importance of informal leaders. Brokers receive demands, work within the political and administrative apparatus to respond to them, and make key redistributive decisions in the last mile of service delivery. A failure to organize and cooperate, then, may in part originate in inadequate local leadership. Indeed, Auerbach (2016) finds that communities with more local leaders per capita are more likely to be able to channel resources toward themselves. An open question thus remains about when effective local leaders emerge and connect citizens to political power. To what extent do local leaders support Bengali Muslims?

Finally, the experience of Bengali Muslims hints at the limits of political organization and cooperation. It is possible that organization is effective in delivering basic public services to communities, but that may not be sufficient for true social mobility. Murshid draws attention to how Bengali Muslims experience the lack of something more fundamental: dignity and respect. Their absence inhibits not only one's sense of agency every day but also the likelihood of material successes such as getting hired or being elected. Dignity and respect cannot be granted through local-level distributive politics alone, and it remains unclear how marginalized groups should go about gaining them.

Demands for autonomy

The next set of books explores what exactly it is marginalized groups might ask for and how those demands shape state structure, focusing on tribal and native groups in the north and northeastern parts of the country. While migrants may organize to seek opportunity in new places where they have limited power and access, these native and tribal groups focus instead on maintaining their authority and control in the face of disruptions from invasions, colonization, state-building, and economic upheaval.

Chandra's book is a deep dive into the history and politics of the Chota Nagpur plateau, a rural area lying in the heart of Jharkhand. Home to multiple tribal groups, this large tract of forested land was governed as a region of exception by the British colonial administration and experiences relatively limited state presence today. Though this might seem like willful marginalization on the part of elites, Chandra argues the current status quo is the product of tribal-led negotiation through multiple acts of rebellion and resistance. The lack of state presence is a sign of agency.

Chandra supports his argument through careful description of multiple episodes of tribal rebellion and state response spanning the precolonial, colonial, postcolonial, and present eras. His methodology is varied, a combination of process tracing with a heavy reliance on archival documents, accompanied by several present-day accounts and stories told by members of tribal communities whom the author encountered during his ethnographic research in the area. Of note is the analysis of the Ulgulan movement or the Birsa Munda rebellion. Often described as a fiercely anti-colonial movement powered by a religious ("millenarian") fervor, Chandra suggests it may have been something more practical. He traces its origins to peaceful petitioning by a group of landed Christian peasantry dispossessed by the colonial administration. Those dissatisfied with the results of this

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nonviolent claim-making eventually turned to a more militant strategy led by Birsa Munda, who led a movement to reclaim tribal religions. While the movement never successfully dislodged the colonial administration, it led to the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, which prohibited the transfer of tribal lands to non-tribals. A major point of this episode is even a violent movement can be deemed successful without overthrowing the state, and the concessions this form of claim-making is part of the process of state building.

Chandra also emphasizes that participants in rebellion are frequently local powerholders trying to gain and protect influence. This is shown through the Birsa Munda movement's petitioning by landed peasantry, but can also be seen in the early colonial period, where local "forest rajas" aimed to consolidate power as the new administration decreased the influence of more powerful tribal leaders. Throughout history, economic and political upheavals have challenged the status quo, leading to claim-making and resistance by those who initially held power.

Importantly, as Chandra acknowledges, these acts are neither egalitarian nor fully representative of tribal communities. The Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act, for example, delineated the rights and privileges of certain groups in rural Jharkhand but left others out. The Tana Bhagat tribes were one such excluded group, who eventually channeled their grievances to a different set of actors and negotiated with the Indian nationalist movement and the Gandhian Congress Party.

Indeed, the formation of the broader Indian state has always required constant negotiation with different groups, particularly tribes, in places where state authority is generally weak. Chima and Saikia finally examine the most extreme form of interaction between the state and marginalized groups: secessionist movements. *Insurgency in India's Northeast* (2024) centers on armed separatist movements in the country's northeastern states. Like the tribes of Chota Nagpur, these groups have been in constant negotiation about their right to self-determination and statehood before, during, and after Independence. Why do these negotiations turn into secessionist demands, and what is the role of identity in these demands?

Chima and Saikia focus on the process of identity formation in light of postcolonial efforts to integrate groups to create a national identity. They argue first that tribal groups in the northeast are held together by malleable but enduring in-group cultural and historical attachments. As in most postcolonial states, the geographic boundaries of these groups did not overlap with the political boundaries created at Independence. The creation of the state borders, however, created a unifying identity under which these groups could organize and make demands on the state. The creation of a geographically demarcated umbrella identity (e.g., Assamese or Mizo) among disparate groups, tribal or otherwise, in opposition to the national Indian identity likely aided the emergence of demands for secession in particular. As argued by Chandra, the state's reactions to and accommodation of these demands are important parts of state and nation formation.

Chima and Saikia illustrate this argument through a historical process-tracing exercise of separatist movements in Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, and Assam. They draw mainly upon existing scholarly work, newspapers, historical documents, and a handful of personal interviews for each case. In each of the cases, dissatisfaction with whether and how a territory was integrated into the new Indian nation sparked demands for secession, which were in turn met with some combination of violent response or political accommodation by the central government. The success of these central government strategies varied. The Mizo, originally part of Assam, were granted full statehood in 1986, and demands for secession have since ceased. In Manipur, on the other hand, integration with the broader Indian nation itself remains contested, leaving few paths to accommodation and therefore sustaining conflict. Nagaland remains a middle category with some continuing low level of violence. Assam is particularly interesting: ethnic Assamese originally organized in response to national integration and, echoing Murshid, the arrival of migrants from Bangladesh. Today, opposition to these migrants has created an opening for an alliance with and representation by the Bhartiya Janata Party. In this case and the others, organization around one identity happens in response to an "other," whether it is the broader Indian state or a different group of citizens. In each case, political representation releases the steam of secessionist demands.

Reading the two books in parallel opens many avenues for discussion. Chandra, for example, highlights the role of political upheaval in disrupting the material interests of local tribal elites and thereby prompting conflict. Much of Chima and Saikia's discussion focuses on identity alone, yet it is likely that economic upheaval makes certain identities variably salient. Additionally, Chandra suggests that tribal rebellion reflected the interests of local elites at the expense of others; it would be important for future research to examine which voices have been left out by demands for secession and subsequent accommodation in the northeast.

Conversely, Chima and Saikia highlight how certain policies created the idea of an "other," thereby defining the boundaries of who was included in tribal demands for secession and who was not. These observations encourage further research about the lines along which the tribes of Chota Nagpur initially organized and how they perceived their shared interests—not just those of tribal elites, but of ordinary individuals as well. While elites may have been vying for power, identity or religious-based appeals were probably also necessary for larger

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movements (Ashutosh Varshney, "Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Rationality," *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (1), 2003).

Frontiers and further research

The boundaries of the Indian state are continuously changing. There are four types of frontiers that have been remarkably dynamic since Independence: international borders, growing cities, tribal lands, and areas where state control is still contested. As the state expands, certain groups—Bengali Muslims, rural migrants, tribes, and northeastern ethnic groups—may be left out or find they are worse off. The books in this review explore what this marginalization may look like and the potential for citizens to organize against it.

This work, first and foremost, helps us understand what these groups want. Some demands are material. As Auerbach and Thachil highlight, rural migrants require the extension of state public services to survive; Chandra posits that tribal rebellion may have originated in economic demands surrounding the control of land. Murshid, Chima, and Saikia, however, show us marginalized citizens at the frontier may also suffer from a lack of agency, recognition, or self-determination—or, in short, dignity (Tanu Kumar, *Building Social Mobility: How Subsidized Homeownership Creates Wealth, Dignity, and Voice in India*, forthcoming). Dignity is not so easily granted through elections and claim-making (violent or otherwise), and its accrual is not easily predictable.

These books also underscore the contentiousness of making demands and having them heard. It is commonly held that one of the founding ideas for India was the concept of "accommodating diversity" (Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, 2004). These books show what accommodation looks like, from the colonial period through to the present. Importantly, they highlight the role of pressure—violent or otherwise—in the form of tribal rebellion, demands for secession, or political organization. This area is ripe for more research, specifically exploring what types of accommodation different forms of pressure might yield.

Local leaders, moreover, are central to organizing demands and creating this pressure. Auerbach, Thachil, and Chima clearly show how political brokers and local elites are incentivized to place pressure on the state to consolidate their own local control. Yet more thorough case knowledge is needed to explore how organized claim-making benefits this leadership. To understand how such organization serves local elites, it would be useful to analyze large-scale events like the farmers' protests of 2020 and 2021.

While each of these books makes important theoretical contributions, it is the collective case knowledge they contribute that is most valuable. Each includes primary data collection on events that may not have been visible without careful fieldwork and immersive research. As such, these new works provide a valuable reference for scholars of India across disciplines and show developing field-based expertise is as fruitful today as ever.

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