

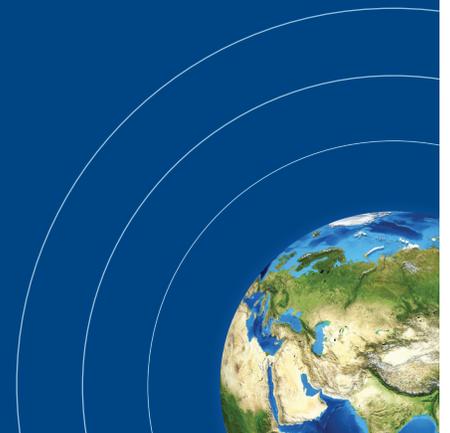


PENN: CURRENT RESEARCH ON SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Spaces of Collective Representation

Urban Growth, Democracy, and Political Inclusion

LISA MITCHELL
Associate Professor, South Asia Studies
Director, South Asia Center, School of Arts & Sciences





Dharna Chowk, a designated “assembly space” near the center of Hyderabad, India’s fourth largest and fourth wealthiest city, has been the site of thousands of political demonstrations since its creation in the late 1990s, an average of more than five per day last year alone.¹ Created by then Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu (1995–2004), *Dharna Chowk* relocated collective political activity away from government offices like the State Secretariat and the Legislative Assembly, and was seen with some controversy as reflecting Naidu’s aspirations to create a “world class” city by moving political activity to a less visible and less disruptive location.² Despite initial resistance to this constriction of space, the site quickly became an established feature of political life in Hyderabad, with residents of other cities even demanding similar spaces (“‘Dharna Chowk’ in Tirupati sought” 2011). More recently, the site has again become a center of controversy in the wake of current Chief Minister Kalvakuntla Chandrasekhara Rao’s February 2017 decision to relocate Hyderabad’s designated assembly space to the outskirts of the city, more than 20 km away.³ Rao’s decision is particularly surprising given the dependence of his own electoral success on precisely the type of visible political activity that he is now seeking to move to the margins, causing many to see it as an authoritarian effort to silence discussion and restrict political opposition, or as a ploy to repurpose the land in question for lucrative private investment and new building contracts.⁴ In a country with a long history of collective assemblies for political purposes, efforts to contain urban public political activities within circumscribed spaces have intensified in the wake of the liberalization of India’s economy in the early 1990s, with somewhat limited success.⁵ The memory of the effectiveness of collective forms of assembly during the Indian nationalist struggle led to debates over their continued necessity in the early years after independence, with the leaders of the new nation suggesting they were no longer needed and others continuing to model their political engagements on these earlier examples of successful public space activism (Chakrabarty 2007). Yet despite both these debates and the subsequent administrative efforts to place limits on such practices, the prevalence of collective political activity in urban public space has only grown since independence, becoming a noticeable feature of the world’s largest democracy. Although administrative efforts to restrict political activity have not been entirely successful, their most significant impact has been to criminalize practices that had previously been considered everyday forms of political participation.⁶

As an up-and-coming contender for “most dynamic global city,” and as a site of some of the most active ongoing public political engagement in the world, Hyderabad offers an ideal context for exploring the relationship

1 Police statistics show that approximately 1900 protests were held at *Dharna Chowk* in 2016, out of which approximately 1500 were granted permits. See Reddy 2017 and Lasania 2017. Population data taken from Government of India 2015. Wealth measured by GDP per capita, 2013 (Parilla et al. 2015: 4).

2 Naidu explicitly sought to turn Hyderabad into another Singapore, while at the same time conceptualizing Indian cities as being in competition with one another. Focused especially on attracting IT, pharmaceutical, financial, healthcare, and biotech companies, he coined the phrase “Bye-Bye Bangalore, Hello Hyderabad” as part of his efforts to remake Hyderabad as the new Silicon Valley of India. He commissioned McKinsey and Company to produce a policy document, *Vision 2020*, to guide development in the state, implemented numerous market-based reforms, and sought to privatize health care and education. See Ghosh 1999.

3 Four sites have been proposed, all a significant distance from the seats of government power. While the original designated assembly space, *Dharna Chowk*, was located near Indira Park less than two kilometers from the State Secretariat, the four new sites proposed by Chandrasekhara Rao are much farther away. Shamshabad, near the city’s new airport, is 27 km south of the State Secretariat, Gandhi Maisamma 26 km to the north, and Pratap Singaram 23 km to the east. Jawahar Nagar, the closest at just under 20 km, is also the site of the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation’s garbage dumpsite.

4 By April 2015, less than a year after becoming Chief Minister, Chandrasekhara Rao approved plans for the construction of a new multiplex cultural center opposite Indira Park which would feature four auditoria, rehearsal theatres, seminar rooms, a library, art museum, painting and sculpture galleries, restaurants, guest rooms, and extensive parking facilities. In January 2016, 14 acres across from the park on the *Dharna Chowk* road were rezoned from open space to public and semi-public use, paving the way for the cultural center. This was done with no public discussion (Shaw 2017).

5 In 1991, a wide range of economic reforms were undertaken by the Indian government, including the lifting of restrictions on foreign direct investment, reductions in tariffs on imported goods, and expansion of licensing across industries. See “Looking Back and Looking Ahead at the Liberalisation Process” and “The 1991 Reforms: How Homegrown Were They?” 2016, and “Economic Liberalisation in India: Then and Now” 2017.

6 The practice of *dharna*—for which *Dharna Chowk* was named—was first prohibited by the Court of Justice at Benares, then made a punishable offence by Bengal Regulation VII in 1820, and eventually incorporated into Section 508 of the Indian Penal Code of 1860. Sections 141–160 of the Indian Penal Code were drafted in 1860 to address “Offences Against the Public Tranquility,” including assemblies and rioting, and can still be used today to disband, censure, or prosecute assemblies of five or more persons. Section 144 of the Indian Criminal Procedure Code, first introduced to India by the British in 1861, but never abolished after independence, allows police to issue a preventive prohibitory order that can remain in place for up to two months, defining in advance any assembly held in the locations covered by the order as unlawful assemblies. These laws have not, however, prevented a wide range of public assemblies and forms of protest from continuing to take place, either under the British or today, but they have succeeded in making it possible to criminalize some forms and instances of collective assembly.



between rapid urban growth, the political uses of public space, and efforts to create “world class” cities.⁷ As city planners, administrators, and elected officials worldwide seek to attract new types of foreign and domestic investment, the uses of public space have become increasingly contested and these differences of opinion have raised new questions. How inclusive are efforts to create “world class” cities? Who benefits from efforts to remake cities as sites attractive to foreign direct investment, and who is excluded from these processes? Do street protests, processions, open air meetings, and other forms of the political that utilize public space mar the attractiveness of urban centers as sites of investment, or mark, as some have suggested, the “incompleteness” of India’s implementation of democracy? Do they represent a failure of democracy, or a stage “on the way to” full democracy? Or do they represent a more intensified version of democracy, one that extends democracy beyond the ritual of the ballot box and offers deeper, more inclusive, and more frequent opportunities for representation, encompassing a wide range of practices between elections as well as during them?

Even more specifically, how can struggles over space in Hyderabad help us to evaluate and improve upon the approaches to open space offered by the United Nations General Assembly’s adoption of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* in 2015, and the UN’s endorsement of the *New Urban Agenda* adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, Ecuador in 2016 (UN General Assembly 2015; UN 2016)? Both agendas have insisted that public space has an important role to play within sustainable urban development, with sections of each agreement focusing on the physical environment of cities, the importance of open space, and the need for universal access to these open spaces. The *New Urban Agenda* envisions cities and human settlements that are “participatory, promote civic engagement, engender a sense of belonging and ownership among all their inhabitants, prioritize safe, inclusive, accessible, green and quality public spaces that are friendly for families, enhance social and intergenerational interactions, cultural expressions and political participation” (UN 2016: paragraph 13(b)). To implement this, the declaration states:

We commit ourselves to promoting safe, inclusive, accessible, green and quality public spaces, including streets, sidewalks and cycling lanes, squares, waterfront areas, gardens and parks, that are multifunctional areas for social interaction and inclusion, human health and well-being, economic exchange and cultural expression and dialogue among a wide diversity of people and cultures, and that are designed and managed to ensure human development and build peaceful, inclusive and participatory societies, as well as to promote living together, connectivity and social inclusion. (UN 2016: paragraph 37)

Goal 11 of the UN’s *2030 Agenda* is to “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” (UN General Assembly 2015: 4). Yet its specific targets explicitly separate the provision of “universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities” (Target 11.7, UN General Assembly 2015: 22), from the goal of making planning and management “inclusive” and “participatory” (Target 11.3, UN General Assembly 2015: 21).

While these statements are clearly important, both agreements imply that the achievement of their stated goals is simply a matter of ensuring access to a minimum quantity of multifunctional open and green space, with little acknowledgment of the fact that such spaces have deeply local and particular meanings, and that their specific locations and histories of usage matter. Rather than approaching space as a universal category that can be

⁷ Hyderabad ranks 5th on the 2017 JLL City Momentum Index (2017).



applied to all cities in the same way or that sees one plot of land as interchangeable with another, I argue for the importance of recognizing how specific public spaces integrate with other urban spaces and draw their particular meanings and uses from these proximities, relationships, and histories. The location of public space matters. Just as the space in front of Hyderabad's Legislative Assembly or State Secretariat was seen as more valuable and effective for communication with elected officials, so, too, is the centrally located *Dharna Chowk* considered much more valuable and effective than a similarly sized or even larger space on the outskirts of the city. Particularly when attempting to implement urban development goals in ways that expand inclusion in decision-making processes, it is crucial to recognize localized histories of political participation which call upon public space in particular ways.

In what follows I demonstrate that public space needs to be understood within specific historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts, and that it is therefore important for urban planners and international advisors to develop partnerships with local civil society groups, urban sociologists, and historians when approaching the question of public space in particular urban agglomerations. I use Hyderabad's recent rapid growth as an example of the importance of recognizing how public spaces are used in specific cities and cultural contexts in order to promote inclusive urban planning. I argue that ensuring the availability and accessibility of public space—not just as green or open spaces providing access to fresh air—but also as sites for non-violent political performance and representation, can enable lawmakers to hear voices that they might otherwise ignore. By way of illustration of the value of such localization, I situate the practice of *dharna*, for which Hyderabad's designated protest space is named, within discourses of the right to the city in the face of the growing power of global capital, and argue that the Euro-American normative understandings of democracy that dominate our frames of reference for analysis have impoverished our tools for interpreting both the recent waves of occupation of public space that have swept much of the world, and histories of collective action more generally. In tracing the changing meaning of the practice of *dharna*—widely used in India today to describe a hunger strike, mass non-violent assembly, or sit-down strike—I also locate the shifting spaces in which it has been practiced. In doing so, I model a method for localizing the study of democracy, urban growth, and public space—taking into account the multiple histories of the meanings and practices that have shaped the specific experiences of the political within which urban residents reside. Such attention to local meanings enables the revision of implicit normative assumptions of what the role of public space is or should be—particularly in relation to political decision-making—and can help to produce more inclusive urban planning.

INDIAN DEMOCRACY'S MULTIPLE GENEALOGIES

“Democratic spaces in Hyderabad have become more and more limited since 1987, and even more restricted since 1997,” declared Krishnamurthy, a teacher and political activist I've known for more than two decades, as we sat together over a cup of tea one afternoon in 2012.⁸ His comments marked the growing restrictions that authorities in many Indian cities have placed on public meetings, processions, demonstrations, and other activities that utilize public space for political purposes. “On earlier occasions people were permitted to go up to the [Legislative] Assembly, that was in the '70s and early '80s,” Krishnamurthy explained. “*Dharnas* were permitted in front of the [State] Secretariat. Permissions we had to get, but they were never denied. It was a kind of a routine affair. I don't remember even one instance where it was rejected.” Now, in contrast, he continued, “there are two court orders which do not allow any processions at all. You can't go, you can't organize a *dharna*, and even your meeting could

⁸ Interview, Hyderabad, August 21, 2012. Following ethnographic convention, names have been changed.



be disturbed.” Even in the increasingly rare instances when permission is granted, he lamented that the specific spaces in which political activity is allowed have been dramatically reduced. “Now,” continued Krishnamurthy, “if you want to take out a procession, only one route is permitted: Lower Tank Bund Road via Dhobi Ghat to Indira Park. They stopped permission for *dharna* at Secretariat. It shifted to Indira Park, and they named it *Dharna Chowk*. It’s a place that no one ever goes. It’s a godforsaken place, no one will see you at all.”⁹

Krishnamurthy is just one of many in India today for whom collective access to public space represents a fundamental principle of democracy. Excessive restrictions on the collective use of public space, therefore, threaten what many see as the very foundation of what democracy means, particularly in contexts like Hyderabad where there exist dramatic differences in economic status and educational attainment, and where many do not command dominant linguistic forms and dialects. In the drive to create “world class” cities and stimulate rapid economic growth, urban spaces that were once used for collective forms of communication with representatives of the state are frequently redefined, re-purposed, and more heavily policed in order to prevent their continued use as sites of political performance. This is done in the name of making cities more attractive to foreign investors and eliminating barriers to the smooth flow of traffic and commerce. But Krishnamurthy’s comments suggest that these may not be the only goals for many of Hyderabad’s residents and illustrate the importance of both visibility and recognition as a fundamental feature of political participation.¹⁰

Ironically, Krishnamurthy’s comments were made in the midst of a series of some of the largest public assemblies India has ever seen, collective actions that sought to hold elected officials to their campaign promises to bifurcate the existing administrative state of Andhra Pradesh in order to create the new state of Telangana. In a city in which virtually all positions of power—economic, media, political—were held by migrants from the most agriculturally prosperous coastal districts, local residents of the Telangana region have felt marginalized, excluded from economic growth, and deprived of voice (Kannibiran 2010: 75). Public collective assemblies have been one way of attempting to amplify ignored voices. As momentum built, it soon became impossible for elected officials to ignore these assemblies and continue to prevaricate, and on June 2, 2014, less than two years after my conversation with Krishnamurthy, politicians’ campaign promises to bifurcate the state of Andhra Pradesh were fulfilled with the creation of India’s 29th state.

The largest of the public collective assemblies exceeded a million people. A *Maha Jana Garjana* (literally “great roar of the people”) held in Warangal (population 811, 844), 145 kilometers northeast of Hyderabad, on December 16, 2010, for example, has been described by *The Economic Times* as one of the largest political assemblies in world history, with crowd estimates ranging from 1.2 to 2.6 million (“Largest Political Rallies ...” 2013). Another, held on September 12, 2011 in Karimnagar (population 261,165), 165 km northeast of Hyderabad, again garnered estimates of more than a million people in preparation for the next day’s initiation of what was to become a 42-day *Sakala Janula Samme*, or All People’s Strike (Sunkari 2011).¹¹ Police records collected over just one 11-month period in 2011 while the movement was building toward its height, show over 1,800 separate public assemblies either for or against the division of the state in which First Information Reports were filed—an average of five

⁹ Interview, Hyderabad, August 21, 2012.

¹⁰ On the relationship between visibility and the political, see Mitchell 2014.

¹¹ For a discussion of why such large political assemblies received virtually no national or global media coverage, see Muppidi 2014.



to six per day.¹² Just over 1,200 of these occurred in Hyderabad, its twin city Secunderabad, and the immediate surrounding peri-urban areas to the south and southwest known as Cyberabad. As First Information Reports are filed only in cases where cognizable offenses have occurred, these figures include only those assemblies regarded as illegal, and not the many for which formal permission was obtained, or in which police turned a blind eye. Regardless of whether they were “legal” or made “illegal” by the various bans put in place, there is no doubt that the widespread processions, meetings, and assemblies in public space played a critical role in holding lawmakers accountable and bringing the new administrative state into being.

The new state of Telangana contains some of the region's poorest and most arid districts, a stark contrast to the wealth of its capital. As India's fourth wealthiest city, Hyderabad is home to new special economic zones and knowledge parks like HITEC City, the Financial District, and Genome Valley, which host divisions of major multinational corporations like Microsoft, Amazon, Bank of America, and Facebook, and biotech research centers for companies like Dupont, Monsanto, and Bayer.¹³ But the benefits of Hyderabad's recent rapid growth of Hyderabad have been widely perceived to flow almost exclusively to the many migrants from the more prosperous and well-irrigated districts of coastal Andhra, exacerbating longstanding feelings of exclusion among residents of Telangana. It is these feelings that have prompted the renewal of demands for more equitable approaches to economic growth, and for greater inclusion in administrative state structures and jobs. In effect, the success of the Telangana movement can be read as a resounding critique of the lack of inclusion in the process of creating Hyderabad as a “world class” city, resulting quite literally in the changing ownership of the city and the rejection of Chandrababu Naidu's vision of urban growth. Whether this change will indeed be more inclusive or simply shift ownership from one elite group to another remains to be seen.

In Krishnamurthy's view, the resurgence of the Telangana movement from 2009 onwards has reinvigorated democracy by reclaiming spaces that had been taken away. “With great difficulty during the Telangana movement we could create small spaces,” he said, “and therefore people could come, meet, organize *dharnas*, hold discussions. It has become a little easier.” Here, also, his comments emphasize *space*, and the collecting together of people in urban *public space*, as a fundamental feature of democracy. Mohan Kumar, a human rights activist, echoed Krishnamurthy's emphasis on the role of public space in democracy when he told me that “Aspirations of Telangana people [are] conveyed democratically in diverse forums, not just elections. People, in their own way, they conveyed it through their festivals, in their rituals. In a very democratic way they are holding *dharna*. There was no violence anywhere. [Once] all people came out into the street one day and they cooked their food.”¹⁴ Mohan Kumar's perspective on democracy's meaning places an emphasis on the occupation of space, but with particular stress on non-violent occupation. Concluding, he declared, “I always say that [Telangana] is one of the greatest democratic movements in the world so far that I have ever witnessed. Not even in the China revolution did this take place.”¹⁵ Startling to those for whom China and its revolution represent the antithesis of democracy rather than a pinnacle, Mohan Kumar's comments reinforce the idea that democracy in the Telangana region of India is understood not simply in “local” terms, but in transnational terms that differ quite dramatically from

¹² Data on “registration of cases during the period from Jan. 2011 to Nov. 2011 in connection with the agitation of Telangana and Samaikya Andhra” was obtained under the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005 of Andhra Pradesh State, from the Inspector of Police, S.C.R.B., C.I.D., Hyderabad, Government of Andhra Pradesh, 7 January, 2012. I am grateful to Gandra Mohan Rao, Advocate, for assistance in obtaining this data. A First Information Report (FIR) is filed when a cognizable offence has been committed, and is the first step in setting the criminal justice process in motion.

¹³ Wealth measured by GDP per capita, 2013 (Parilla et al. 2015: 4).

¹⁴ Interview, Hyderabad, August 20, 2012.

¹⁵ Interview, Hyderabad, August 20, 2012.



understandings in parts of the world that have historically claimed to be founders, promoters, and protectors of democracy. To better contextualize the embrace of electoral processes that has occurred in India since independence in 1947, and the relationship between elections and understandings of public space, therefore, it is important to understand the broader context of meanings and practices into which public space and its forms of representation fit. It is to this longer history of practice and the localization of the meanings of public space that this history has produced that I now turn.

FROM *DHARNA* AS DOOR-SITTING TO *DHARNA CHOWK*: PUBLIC ASSEMBLIES IN INDIA

In this section, I trace changes in the meaning of the term *dharna*, offering a genealogy that situates the concept amidst a larger field of political, legal, and social categories, and emphasizing changing features of visibility in relationship to new forms of media and urban spatial arrangements. There is a long history of the formal role of holding audience in India. An ethical ruler or leader was expected to offer his constituents, followers, or subjects regular opportunities for communication. The classical Indian text of statecraft and politics, the *Arthashastra*, attributed to Kautilya, divides the day and night into eight 90-minute portions each. The second part of the day is designated for public audiences—a time to hear and consider “the prayers and petitions of the subjects” (Majumdar 1997: 146). Regardless of whether actual kings followed Kautilya’s template or not, the fact that hearing the petitions of subjects was considered important enough to occupy an entire proportion of each day suggests its centrality in theory. Although the nature and form of power has obviously changed, most Indian politicians and government administrators today feel a similar responsibility to hold public audience sessions with their constituents on a regular basis, often in the form of a regular weekly “Grievance Day” (Cody 2013: 2). Most offices of elected officials, and even domestic architecture reflects this expectation that officials entertain petitioners, with some sort of reception room or audience hall integrated into the design. When the Mahabubnagar District Collector T. K. Sreedevi discontinued the Collectorate’s weekly “Grievance Day” in the wake of the launch of a website for receiving online petitions, the move was met with great protest. Many felt that e-petitioning was something only educated people would have access to, and felt excluded from direct access to the Collector, requesting that the weekly audiences at the Revenue Bhavan in the Collectorate be continued (“Mahabubnagar Collector Urged...” 2015).

One way of approaching the history of *dharna* is to view it as an audience in reverse. Instead of an ethical leader holding audience to enable grievances or concerns to be heard and addressed, *dharna* can be seen as a practice that uses public opinion to seek an audience and public hearing with someone in a position of power by framing the leader or official in a position from which they can be encouraged to act more inclusively or ethically. Rather than opposing or rejecting their power and authority, such appeals celebrate and further reify the ability of someone in a position of power to bring about an action or change. Yet this is not always how *dharna* has been viewed, particularly with the introduction of new British legal and administrative structures and new forms of policing and dispute resolution during the 18th and 19th centuries. Because they saw such actions as challenges to their own authority and sovereignty, the first recourse of British East India Company administrators was usually to seek methods of breaking or delegitimizing the ability of Indians to act collectively. East India Company administrators, and later British state officials referred to collective actions as “combinations,” or less generously, as



“insurgencies,” “mutinies,” “insurrections,” “revolts,” or “rebellions,” even when earlier efforts to communicate with officials had been blatantly ignored or silenced.

John Shore, also known as Lord Teignmouth, Governor-General of British India from 1793 to 1797, offers one of the earliest published efforts to translate the concept of *dharna* as a generalized form of practice into English. Shore was the translator of a number of Persian works written by Hindus, and played a significant role in the British reform of the Indian land revenue system known as the Permanent Settlement, which had far-reaching consequences for economic, political, and legal practices in India. He was also a close personal friend of the philologist William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and was his successor as President of the Society. In the fourth volume of the Society's periodical, *Asiatic Researches*, published in 1799, Shore offers a description of the Indian practice of “sitting *dharna*,” or “watching constantly at the door:”

The inviolability of the Brahmen is a fixed principle of the Hindus, and to deprive him of life, either by direct violence, or by causing his death in any mode, is a crime which admits of no expiation. To this principle may be traced the practice called *dharna*, which was formerly familiar at Benares, and which may be translated caption or arrest. It is used by the Brahmen in that city to gain a point which cannot be accomplished by any other means; and the process is as follows: The Brahmen who adopts this expedient for the purpose mentioned proceeds to the door or house of the person against whom it is directed, or wherever he may most conveniently intercept him: he there sets down in *dharna*, with poison, or a poignard or some other instrument of suicide in his hand, and threatening to use it if his adversary should attempt to molest or pass him, he thus completely arrests him. In this situation the Brahmen fasts, and by the rigor of the etiquette, which is rarely infringed, the unfortunate object of his arrest ought also to fast; and thus they both remain till the institutor of the *Dharna* obtains satisfaction. In this, as he seldom makes the attempt without resolution to persevere, he rarely fails; for if the party thus arrested were to suffer the Brahmin sitting in *dharna* to perish by hunger, the sin would forever lie upon his head (Shore 1799).¹⁶

For Shore, the key to *dharna*'s effectiveness was the intensity of resolve of the party who enacted the practice to persevere until death, and the fear on the part of “the object of arrest” of being held responsible for another's death, particularly that of a Brahmin.

Although he offers no citation, Shore's source of information on *dharna* was almost certainly Jonathan Duncan, the British resident at Benares from 1787 to 1794. In a series of reports submitted to the Governor General between 1792 and 1794, Duncan describes the practice of *dharna* as “one of the superstitious prejudices, which have so long and so generally been cherished here.”¹⁷ The historian Radhika Singha uses Duncan's accounts to characterize *dharna* as a form of defending a claim that happened when someone “cast himself” at the threshold of a person against whom he had a grievance to be redressed, or a debt or claim to be satisfied. He would refuse to get up or eat, and would obstruct the movement of the household till the offending party negotiated terms” (Singha 1998: 88). She observes that practices such as *dharna* that could be used to contest issues or seek redress were characterized by British administrators as “products of a barbaric state of civilization,” and were therefore targeted for reform as part of a larger process of constructing the colonial legal subject and reordering civil and criminal legal authority, a process that involved first wrenching them “out of the codes of meaning and the structures of authority in which they were embedded” (Singha 1998: 88). Because these existing structures of authority posed a challenge to British colonial authority, efforts were made (somewhat unsuccessfully) to redefine such practices as criminal acts.

¹⁶ See also how it is altered and generalized in Maine 1875.

¹⁷ Resident of Benares to Governor General in Council, 11 October 1792, Duncan Records, Regional State Archive, Allahabad, Basta 11, No. 63, cited in Singha 1998: 86-89.



Sanskrit dictionaries offer a range of meanings for the term, *dharna*, including: “holding, possessing, suffering, enduring,” also “immovable concentration of the mind,” enabling its derivatives to be used in a range of ways (Monier-Williams 1999: 515). As applied to a set of practices in Indian history, the earliest citations of the term *dharna* associate it with those efforts, often individual, that involve the prevention of movement and the effort to make known a hardship and compel the target of the action to recognize the hardship and agree to enter into negotiation. The Yale professor Washburn Hopkins noted in 1900 that *dharna*, “literally ‘holding up’ a defaulting debtor by preparing to commit suicide at his door,” has come by the turn of the 20th century to mean “not only ‘door-sitting’ but also any form of obstruction, for example, obstructing a water-course” and that “Fasting is not, therefore, a necessary concomitant of *dharna*” (Hopkins 1900: 146-147, fn. 1). In elaborating, he classifies such forms of obstruction with other modes of exacting payment, including seizing a debtor’s wife, son, or cattle, as well as other means of “moral suasion”—a category that also includes advice, remonstrance, and “following about” (*anugama*) (Hopkins 1900: 146).

Rochisha Narayan’s exploration of the colonial archive suggests that it was not simply prevention of movement and fear of responsibility for another’s death that made the practice of *dharna* so effective, but that the public aspect of the performance of *dharna* was also critical to its power. She points out a crucial but often overlooked detail of a much-cited case of a *dharna* carried out by a Brahmin widow over her right to inheritance of her father-in-law’s property following his death in 1791. The widow’s *dharna* was conducted, not in front of her brother-in-law’s house, the party against whom she had the grievance, but rather in a temple, illustrating once again the importance of visibility. Conducting a *dharna* in full view of an audience enabled her to seek public support for her position in what we might otherwise view as a domestic familial dispute, staging a performance that effectively functioned as a referendum in the face of public opinion (Narayan 2011: 197). The widow’s thirteen-day *dharna* was successful in compelling her brother-in-law to negotiate with her, suggesting that *dharna* was often a last resort of those in structurally less powerful positions against those structurally more powerful, used when other avenues had failed to garner recognition or response. Most significantly, her audience was, in effect, the general public rather than her brother-in-law, and it was public opinion that helped to compel her brother-in-law to enter into negotiation with her.

Narayan’s research on colonial law in 18th and 19th century Banaras has also shown that poor Brahmins, including on occasion Brahmin widows, were sometimes employed by others to sit in *dharna*, often in groups (Narayan 2013). Yet the practice of *dharna* was one that a much broader segment of the population, including bankers, merchants, and other non-Brahmins, saw as a method of obtaining recourse. Sandria Freitag’s archival research in Banaras has caused her to conclude that sitting *dharna* was a form of practice typically used by merchants seeking to collect monies owed to them, rather than by Brahmins (Freitag 1989: 44, 123). And Hopkins observes that although earlier European commentators had interpreted the practice of door-sitting to be limited to Brahmins, nothing explicit is said of this in any of the textual sources cited (Hopkins 1900: 147).

Examples from the colonial archive also suggest that it was a practice that was both individually and collectively employed. An anonymous author in 1835 described a famous house tax strike in Varanasi in 1810-1811 as a *dharna*:

Government having imposed a house tax of considerable amount, the natives, startled by the innovation were immediately in a ferment.... the whole population of the city and its



neighbourhood determined to sit in dharna until their grievances should be redressed.... before Government were in the least apprized of the plan above three hundred thousand persons as it was said deserted their houses, shut up their shops, suspended the labour of their farms, forebore to light fires, dress victuals, many of them even to eat, and sat down with folded arms and drooping heads like so many sheep on the plain which surrounds Benares. (Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge 1835: 10-11)

This definition suggests that any effort to unionize, strike, or join together to collectively gain recognition or audience from someone more powerful would fall into the category of *dharna* (Mitchell, under review).¹⁸ There numerous scattered references to *dharna* or the threat of self-harm or suicide being used as a method of resisting new forms taxation or the imposition of other new colonial state expectations (Singha 1998: 87).

These examples of using public opinion to create opportunities for negotiations with the state, particularly surrounding its imposition of new legal structures, point to the emergence of the relationship between *dharna* and the state. Radhika Singha suggests that the colonial state found such practices threatening precisely because they were evidence of pre-existing “codes of meaning” and “structures of authority” over which the British had no control, and it is these pre-existing codes and structures that can help us better situate the history of such practices in relationship to existing forms of the political (Singha 1998: 87). Henry Maine in his *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions*, published in 1875 as a sequel to *Ancient Law*, uses John Shore’s descriptions as part of a larger argument that characterizes *dharna* (forms of which, interestingly, he recognizes in both Irish and Indian contexts) as an illustration of an early evolutionary stage of redressing a grievance and obtaining justice—a stage just beyond “sudden plunder or slaughter.” In contrast to his understanding of *dharna* as representative of an early evolutionary stage, Maine locates those forms in which the state is directly involved in resolving grievances as the most highly developed form of legal redress. Maine makes clear that the types of arbitration practices through which justice could be sought at a local level were seen as a threat to British authority rather than a feature of a just society.

Most of the available examples of *dharna* drawn from the 18th century involve private parties with grievances over business or economic arrangements, or family members in conflict with one another. Yet from the early 19th century onwards, we can see the growing centrality of the state as the target of *dharna*, simultaneous with both the growing power of the East India Company’s administration and its (unsuccessful) efforts to restrict *dharna* from being used as a form of redressing a grievance. Shore tells us that the practice of “sitting dharna” was banned by the Court of Justice at Benares in 1793, a prohibition that was eventually incorporated into Section 508 of the Indian Penal Code of 1860.¹⁹ Despite these efforts to prohibit *dharna*, Shore notes that the practice was so widely accepted that “the interference of that Court and even of the Resident has occasionally proved insufficient to check it” (Shore 1799: 333).

The varied descriptions of *dharna* above all share in common the fact that those in structurally less powerful positions have been able to utilize the practice to gain audience with someone in a structurally more powerful position and use public opinion to compel them into negotiation. By drawing wider attention to what might have begun as an interpersonal or interfamilial dispute, practitioners seek to bring the weight of collective moral norms to bear upon the person or institution with which they seek to negotiate. This can only be accomplished by taking

¹⁸ See also Dharampal 1971 and 2000.

¹⁹ Shore actually mentions 1783 as the date, though citations elsewhere of 1793 suggest that this was likely a typographical error.



the dispute into the public domain and broadcasting it to gauge the likelihood of wider support, and if successful, using wider support to force parties to enter into negotiation to reach an equitable resolution. In effect, *dharna* is a way of making injustice (or perceived injustice) more visible to a wider social community, and of redefining the constitution of public and private domains. Resort to *dharna* is likeliest when practitioners feel they will have widespread popular support for their side of a dispute. Visibility has historically been local, and success depended upon the moral norms of the immediate community in which a dispute was aired. Under British colonial rule, expanding state control of practices like *dharna* were intertwined with efforts to codify and standardize legal frameworks in order to make the project of political and economic administration easier and more centralized. The widespread moral support for existing practices, however, often made such new laws difficult to effectively enforce, something that continues to be the case today. Although the state tried to respond forcefully to the Varanasi sit-down strike of 1810-11, mentioned earlier, it eventually gave up and rescinded the unpopular house tax. Similarly, today, even when a practice has been technically defined as illegal, widespread popular support ensures that such actions are not prosecuted and will sometimes even garner official sanction and protection (Mitchell 2014: 539-540).

DHARNA IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Today, what gets labelled as a *dharna* is most commonly an action that targets the state or its representatives, with District Collectors, Chief Ministers, and Members of Parliament obvious targets for complaints as varied as substandard schools and textbook shortages, inclusion in affirmative action quotas, increases in university tuition, falling commodity prices, or rising petrol costs. Mallikarjuna, a resident of Warangal, described to me his very first participation in a *dharna* as a 10th class student over a government hike in college fees:

In the first phase, we took out a rally. More than one thousand people participated. We went from college to the authorities. Then we submitted a memorandum. After one week there was no response, then we started agitation. We started a relay hunger strike. For one month daily some 25-30 people sat there. Then afterwards we went to an indefinite fast—one dozen people. Then the authorities came, and they agreed with our demands. So no fee hike.

Mallikarjuna is not exceptional in placing *dharna* agitations within an escalating series of strategies for being heard, obtaining recognition, or opening negotiations. *Dharna* is rarely the option of first resort, but rather tends to be employed only when actors have been unsuccessful in obtaining recognition of their concerns and other available options have been exhausted.

Probably the most famous exemplar of such practices is Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Yet placing Gandhi's tactics within their longer genealogies also demonstrates the rich set of practices from which he himself was drawing, and shows that although he was brilliantly adept at utilizing and popularizing such practices, rescuing them from British legal, military, and political efforts to eliminate them, he did not invent them (Mitchell, under review). His original contributions included the translation of existing non-violent forms of making known distress into an English-speaking cultural context which was unfamiliar with such practices, and the coining of a new term, *satyagraha*, often translated as "truth-force." *Satyagraha* called upon the moral authority evoked in face-to-face encounters, and used public opinion to encourage participation in negotiations, but also recognized the desire and necessity of continuing to live together. Rather than rejecting the sovereignty of the authorities against



whom *satyagraha* was practiced, Gandhi called for mutual recognition within an ongoing relationship in contexts in which mutual recognition did not necessarily happen naturally. He also was the first to recognize the power of mass media, particularly visual mass media in extending the audience (and therefore potential moral judge) of performative acts of self-deprivation and potential self-harm.

The transformation of *dharna* through the use of mass media has been significant. With the advent of widespread televisual coverage of *dharna* agitations, physical blockage and the prevention of movement has become much less important than publicity gained through enhanced visibility. This helps to explain why Chandrababu Naidu's creation of a new designated protest space in the late 1990s was met with such short-lived protest. Although processions and *dharnas* might take place anywhere in the city of Hyderabad, they were particularly popular at sites of political power, including the Legislative Assembly (where the state's elected representatives meet), the State Secretariat (administrative offices of state government employees), Raj Bhavan (the official residence of the Governor of the state, who acts as the local representative of the President of India), and the Hyderabad District Collector's office (a member of the Indian Administrative Service appointed as head of the district). A corner of Lumbini Park just opposite the entrance to the State Secretariat, was one of the most popular sites for state-level demonstrations. It was also located in the midst of one of seven new flyover construction projects initiated by Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, part of his larger plan to ensure the free flow of both traffic and commerce in the city. When civil society groups in the late 1990s began to realize that no police permits would be granted for processions or *dharnas* at any locations except the newly established *Dharna Chowk*, there were initially some attempts at protesting this change, but these did not last long. Located two kilometers from the State Secretariat, *Dharna Chowk* sits on a quite back street behind Indira Park—a thoroughfare to nowhere and a road upon which almost no one ever goes. Its occupation blocks nothing and faces no one, almost suggesting a parody of what *dharna* had earlier been. Yet despite this, it was not long before *Dharna Chowk* was embraced as a key site for making grievances known, with reporters assigned to cover it with a regular beat and residents of other cities soon demanding their own designated assembly spaces, something that would not have happened without the growing importance of televisual media (“‘Dharna Chowk’ in Tirupati sought” 2011).

Soon the goal was not to shape local public opinion through public display in front of a site of power or through the prevention of the movement of a representative of the state, but rather through the appearance on that day's news. Even rail blockades—a closely related form used for drawing public attention to a *federal*-level grievance, which typically target the most popular express train to Delhi—shifted from sending their message to the national capital by inconveniencing travelers headed there, to sending their message via televised media. Although in the past they might delay a train for hours or even days, groups today often halt a train for only 15-20 minutes, just long enough for photographers and television cameras to capture the banners and chants, and often with full cooperation of railway officials, before releasing the train (Mitchell 2014: 532-533).

Indeed, Hyderabad has not been alone in establishing a designated demonstration space slightly off main thoroughfares and away from seats of power. In the nation's capital, Delhi, India Gate, located opposite the President's house and Parliament, has historically been one of the most popular locations for political assemblies, particularly since independence. Yet, in Delhi, too, use of this popular space for political assembly has been severely restricted in recent decades, with groups asked to relocate their proposed actions to the road behind Jantar



Mantar (an early 18th-century astronomical observatory and present-day tourist attraction), a quiet street with little traffic. In the creation of designated protest spaces off the beaten track and removed from sites of power, *dharna* has shifted from a practice characterized by the focused concentration of a single person or group to prevent the movement of the object of protest, to the symbolic performance of assembly in a fixed and designated space that blocks no one and prevents nothing.

A final surprising recent development in relation to *dharna* has been its use by state officials against other state officials. In January 2014, India witnessed members and supporters of the recently elected *Aam Aadmi Party* (Common Man's Party), the democratically elected ruling party of the Indian capital region of Delhi, stage a sit-down protest in front of the Home Minister's office in Delhi to demand greater control over the Delhi police force, which falls under control of the Central government rather than the Delhi state government. The action prompted accusations of "vigilantism" and "anarchy" as well as widespread surprise that a successfully elected political party in power should engage in a form of political action more typically resorted to by opposition parties or those in marginal positions of power. The *LA Times* called it "the most unpredictable Indian political development in a generation" (Bengali 2014). Indeed, for a ruling party to stage a demonstration against its own state might initially appear to be the most dramatic of contradictions. However, at the same time, India has recently dramatically expanded the number of its elected officials nationwide. Amendments 73 and 74, introduced in 1992, have created a third tier of local level elected offices, embracing the decentralization of the state that policy documents like McKinsey's *Vision Andhra Pradesh 2020* have advocated, and there are now 3 million new locally elected offices in addition to up to 795 Members of Parliament (MPs) at the national level, and more than 4,000 Members of the various state level Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) (Desouza 2008: 311). Many who used to negotiate with or struggle against the state on a regular basis now literally are the state and serve as elected officials (Collins 2017). If, as Henri Lefebvre has argued, the state provides the template upon which the abstract space of the city is today produced, "created by the imperatives of a capitalist economy and the state's involvement in the management and domination of space" (Butler 2012: 49), what does it mean when forms of protest and struggle themselves enter the very practices of the state?

One way of answering this is to recognize the change in meaning that *dharna* and related practices have undergone historically. Although often glossed as "protest," this essay argues that framing *dharna* as "protest" inserts a different understanding of the relationship historically constructed between those who participate in such actions and those they seek to engage in negotiation. In the remaining section, I elaborate on the distinction between practices that "protest against" authority and those that demand inclusion and "participation within" formal processes of decision-making.

DEMOCRACY, PUBLIC SPACE, AND THE WORLD CLASS CITY

Timothy Mitchell's book *Carbon Democracy* has suggested new methods for approaching the study of democracy by attending to the ways that various groups have been able to come together collectively to demand more inclusive structures of rule. He focuses on the ways that coal miners, railwaymen, and dock workers were able to demand inclusion within political decision-making from the 1880s onward through their control of the movement of coal—a crucial commodity upon which urban centers were absolutely dependent. Mitchell argues that it was this



control of the movement of an essential commodity—and the ability to prevent coal from reaching its destination through strikes and work stoppages—that enabled these groups to eventually bring about both expanded suffrage and the modern welfare state (Mitchell 2009: 406). I extend Mitchell's method by approaching democracy not as a fixed set of institutions put into place in *response* to such demands for inclusion, but rather as the various forms of practice through which actors have demanded and continue to demand inclusion within ongoing processes of decision-making, following my Telangana informants in regarding desires for access to spaces of participation and inclusion as a fundamental part of what democracy means. Such a perspective offers an approach which sees democracy not as the introduction of a fixed set of electoral institutions that had earlier been absent, but rather as a dynamic and ongoing set of contestations over inclusion within both structures of decision-making and economic transformations. It also supports the localization of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and the *New Urban Agenda*.

Despite renewed interest in collective forms of assembly in the wake of the crowds that have emerged into public spaces in the context of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, or the Black Lives Matter movement, to name just a few, corporeal forms of communication like *dharna* are rarely theorized as playing a significant role within the *ongoing* routine processes and *internal* institutions of democratic practice. As the democratic theorist Bernard Manin writes, the fact that representative democracy today gives no institutional role to the assembly of people, is “what most obviously distinguishes it from the democracy of the ancient city-states” (Manin 1997: 8). At best, forms of collective assembly are today recognized as external forces on democracy, or as playing a role in the transition to democracy. Jeffrey Schnapp and Matthew Tiews capture this widely accepted view when they write that historical shifts in the role of “mass assembly and collective social action” and the representation of “the equation between crowds and modernity” have today “assign[ed] to large-scale mass political actions a fallback function restricted to times of exception (war, acute social conflicts, and the like)” (Schnapp and Tiews 2006: xi). Judith Butler, writing in the wake of Tahrir Square, generalizes bodies assembled collectively in public as “resistance” to the state and “opposition to the legitimacy of the state,” seeing any bodies massed in public as an effort to “redeploy the space of appearance in order to contest and negate the existing forms of political legitimacy” (Butler 2015: 85), rather than as an acknowledgment, even reification, of state sovereignty, or as an effort to be recognized by the existing state, be actively (willingly, even eagerly) interpellated into its networks and included within its ongoing processes of decision-making.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

John Parkinson has argued that “democracy depends to a surprising extent on the availability of physical, public space, even in our allegedly digital world,” and, like this essay, demonstrates that this physical space is currently under threat (Parkinson 2012: 2, 11). Using a range of data from 11 capital cities drawn from six continents he, too, identifies shifts in many cities that have placed restrictions on the uses of public space, but suggests that many of these restrictions “apply only when we perform certain kinds of roles: in particular, they apply when we act as politically engaged citizens, not when we act as shoppers or employees on a lunch break” (Parkinson 2012: 4).²⁰ As more and more elected officials and city planners envision transformations of their urban settlements

²⁰ The cities he analyzes are, in Europe, London and Berlin; in North America, Ottawa and Washington, D.C.; in Latin America, Mexico City and Santiago; in Australasia, Wellington and Canberra; in East Asia, Tokyo and Hong Kong; and in Africa, Cape Town (p. 11).



into “world class” cities, such restrictions are likely to grow even more. Of particular concern to Parkinson is the growing inaccessibility of public buildings, and the importance of public spaces that are adjacent to political buildings (Parkinson 2012).²¹ Parkinson argues that we must go beyond simply arguing for accessibility, and offers recommendations that are directly relevant to the UN declarations. Parkinson’s examination of specific urban spaces in these 11 cities shows clearly that both the visibility of spaces and their proximity to decision makers are of utmost importance. Even in an era dominated by virtual communication, he argues that “the things that are communicated involve real people who take up, occupy, share, and contest physical space,” and shows that physical presence within public space matters today for democracy because it generates the images that dominate media consumption and transmission (Parkinson 2012: 1, 8).

The analysis of public space in Hyderabad outlined above offers three conclusions relevant for urban planners and policymakers. First, it’s not enough to simply make provision for public space for recreation and relaxation. Public space also needs to be made available for use by politically engaged citizens. Second, the location of this public space matters. In particular, as Parkinson argues, it is important that public space be located in proximity to public buildings and sites of decision-making, and that these public spaces be visible to lawmakers and elected officials (Parkinson 2012: 18).²² And third, urban planners and policymakers must work closely with local civil society groups, historians, urban sociologists, and others with knowledge of the specific historical meanings and symbolic values of particular public spaces in order to localize UN Sustainable Development and *New Urban Agenda* goals. Local meanings matter, and should be included within decision-making regarding the re-purposing of existing spaces in order to be truly inclusive. If, as the UN agreements proclaim, our goals include “peaceful, inclusive, and participatory societies,” then all users of a space must be taken into account and allowed to participate in decisions *before* plans are developed. As Hyderabad illustrates, an open space at the center of the city in close proximity to seats of power is quite different from a space on the urban outskirts near the municipal garbage dump and miles from political offices.

Situating political practices like *dharna* within their longer genealogies of practice that predate the formal introduction of institutions and practices of electoral democracy offers a more effective way of thinking about democracy and public space. Viewing practices outside the West not as bastardized forms of democracy or as failures to measure up to others’ norms, but rather as having a history worth theorizing in their own right, can offer new tools for analyzing and enhancing the uses of public space not only in India but also elsewhere in the world, including in the West. At the very least, such contextualization can help us recognize forms of collective assembly as fundamental features of democracy, and therefore as essential considerations in approaching decision-making and policy localization related to the creation, protection, accessibility, and maintenance of public space.

²¹ For a discussion of the former, see Chapter 6; for the latter, see Chapter 7.

²² See also Chapter 7.

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