
Exploring the Contours of Legitimacy in Neighbourhoods in North Kerala, India

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During fieldwork in Thalassery in North Kerala I was struck by how neighbourhood spaces were strong sites of legitimacy and social control, while also being spaces of friendship and support. In Thalassery, a neighbour's presence at the event meant to finalise a marriage was crucial and a local elder (*nattu makkyastan*) would officiate at a wedding when there was no priest. *Natakar enna parayum?* (What will the neighbours say?) was a constant refrain and indicated the importance given to what the neighbours considered legitimate. Social control also seemed to be exercised partly through gossip, although in varying degrees in different kinds of neighbourhood. In my field work carried out both in Kerala and later in the northern state of Rajasthan has emerged a strong influence of the neighbourhood in everyday life; for example, in consumer choices, girls and women's education, clothing conventions¹ or employment.

While the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, geography and urban planning have long traditions of neighbourhood studies that go back to the late nineteenth century,² a great deal of the literature has been preoccupied with what Pardo and Prato call a 'problem-centred approach' (2013: 85) coupled with a focus on poverty and poor neighbourhoods.³ In contrast, I am interested in understanding the space of neighbourhoods, their influence on everyday life and the ways in which the neighbourhood is a site of legitimacy in everyday life and its transformations.

Drawing predominantly on the ethnographic contexts of two neighbourhoods in Thalassery in North Kerala, India, in this short contribution to the debate on legitimacy I seek to explore the contours of legitimacy in neighbourhoods. In addressing these questions, I am influenced by Pardo's call for a 'more comprehensive view of the dynamics of legitimacy, and its relations to authority and power' (2000: 4). I also draw on the rich discussions held during the IUS workshop *Erosions of Legitimacy and Urban Futures: Ethnographic Research Matters* held in September 2017.

¹ See Abraham 2010 for the influence of a neighbourhood on veiling practices.

² A perfect example is the famous study by Whyte (1955 [1943]). For a good discussion of this production, see Sanjek (1999).

³ See Sampson, Morenoff and Gannon-Rowley (2002). One exception was Massey's study in which he discussed urban concentrations in which the poor would be exposed to crime, disease and violence and concentrations of affluence which 'enhance the benefits and privilege of the rich' (1996: 395).

Two Neighbourhoods in Thalassery, North Kerala

Neighbourhoods are a strong influence in everyday life, not least because of the sensorial intimacy that a neighbourhood brings to it. The sights, sounds and smells mean that neighbours often know intimate details about those who live near them — they hear quarrels, smell what is being cooked, see who visits and when, and so on. It is both this sensorial intimacy and a shared sensorial landscape in everyday life that make the neighbourhood such a powerful influence in people's lives.

As I discuss below, neighbourhoods are constituted through a variety of practices: reciprocity, friendship, worship, control or violence. The circle of who one considers a neighbour varies, pointing to the fact that while neighbourhoods need to be seen as entities that are constituted through proximity and friendship, caste, or political ideology, it is important to recognize that they are also shaped through particular non-everyday events — such as a political killing, or communal violence.

Between 1996 and 1998 I did an intensive fieldwork for over 18 months in two neighbourhoods in Thalassery. Since then, over these twenty years, I have visited these neighbourhoods for shorter periods. One neighbourhood is located in the municipality area of Thalassery, the other is located in the neighbouring village area. Both neighbourhoods are heterogeneous in terms of class and religion. However, there are significant differences between the two which I will detail briefly below.

The neighbourhood in the town has, on average, larger house plots and includes several large houses which used to be matrilineal joint family (*tharavad*) homes. Most houses have compound walls that divide one house compound from another. There is a mix of Hindu households of different castes, Muslims and some Christians, including a provincial house for nuns where I lived while I did field work in the area. I call this neighbourhood Pattamkunnu (*kunnu* in Malayalam means hill and the neighbourhood is on a little hill that slopes down to the shore of the Arabian sea).

The other neighbourhood, Devaloor, is centred on a place of worship — a *kavu*, or forest shrine, which is now large and is famous for a temple festival in which the epic Ramayana is performed. As is common of neighbourhoods centred around a place of worship, Devaloor is predominantly inhabited by Thiyyas, the caste that manages the temple. The Thiyyas are an in-between caste, who suffered untouchability and are known by their traditional occupation of toddy tapping⁴ and coconut tree climbing. The neighbourhood has a mix of households based on class and strong kinship networks, as a result of the partition of property among kin over several generations. Another significant difference between the two neighbourhoods was that in 1996 houses in Devaloor were closer to each other, very few had compound walls and paths often passed the front of houses, resulting in a greater visibility and interaction.

⁴ Toddy is coconut tree sap.

The Contours of Legitimacy in the Two Neighbourhoods

In both neighbourhoods, neighbours were considered very important. At weddings, in the event of a death or in other significant events, neighbours help a lot. At these events, young men from the neighbourhood help construct the tent, arrange the chairs and tables that have been hired, and serve food. In addition, a few women from the neighbourhood would come to help grate and grind coconut and other ingredients. Over the years, however, one change that has come about is that a number of tasks that used to be done by neighbours — such as constructing a tent — are now done by professionals. However, neighbours continue to help out at important events. This is particularly the case in Devaloor where even if neighbours do not construct the tent themselves, they will supervise the construction. The support of neighbours at these events and in moments of crisis makes people see the neighbourhood as an important place in which to live together according to relations of reciprocity.

On occasions such as a marriage or a house warming, neighbours not only help in kind but also contribute towards the expenses by gifting money. People would describe how neighbours gave money at a wedding, or a housewarming; or how they did so at gatherings organised to raise money from neighbours on behalf of a needy person. The latter has been replaced by bank loans. Thus, loans and professional services have to some extent undermined the constitution of the neighbourhood as an interdependent moral community in the Durkheimian sense. This changing context is important in our understanding the neighbourhood as a site of legitimacy.

The importance of the neighbourhood as a site of legitimacy is underlined by the aforementioned practice by which the local elder may officiate at the wedding instead of a priest. Furthermore, while it is considered important to obtain the approval of different relatives before a marriage is fixed, it is also important to obtain the approval of neighbours. The presence of the local elder, the articulation of local custom and the importance of neighbours as witnesses point to the importance of the neighbourhood as a site in which legitimacy is sought.

While neighbours are a source of legitimacy and of support they also exercise considerable social control. Meeting relevant findings in the literature (Besnier 2009, Nakassis 2010, Ong 1987), the recurrent comment, ‘What will the neighbours say?’ and the stories that I collected in which neighbours are mentioned as ‘talking’ ‘gossiping’, ‘advising’ point to the fact that in the neighbourhood social behaviour is controlled by the fear of ‘comments’, gossip or rumours. Neighbours have emerged as important players not only in the dynamics of social and economic support but also as a group that exerted control, a group that was the guardian of the norms and rules. The neighbourhood was, then, the site in which people exercised control, censured and upheld dominant ideas of morality.

Dispute Resolution, Political Rivalry and Competing Claims of Legitimacy

The neighbourhood as a space in which legitimacy is established or garnered changed dramatically over the twentieth century. Until the 1930s or 1940s, there were caste groupings in clusters of administrative units in which the eldest male from a large and prestigious

matrilineal joint family *tharavads* (houses or kin groups) would hear civil and criminal cases (Murkoth Kumaran quoted in Kunyappa 1975). Depending on the nature of the offence, people were fined, punished or in some cases excommunicated. In this sense, as I have mentioned, the local level was the effective unit of the caste and of caste control; the geographic size of the unit deciding the case seems to have depended on the nature of the case (Mayer 1960). It is unclear when exactly this system disappeared but several people have suggested that it dwindled in influence and then ceased as the influence grew of the secular law courts in colonial India. It has been replaced by other institutions and players, most notably government run courts.

However, in some cases there is an attempt to resolve problems at the local level. Party leaders play an important role in this. In Kerala the neighbourhood has been an important unit for political organisation and this has been strengthened by the fact that Kerala has one of the best-established systems of local government in the country. Political parties have local organising committees that play a key role in dispute settlement — most often in a way that privileges the party loyalist. How much authority these committees are able to wield depends on who is in power at the state government level and who is in power at central government level. This form of dispute resolution indicates the existence of competing claims of legitimacy and processes of legitimation at the level of the neighbourhood, which is most evident in disputes over providing land for a road. With a dramatic increase in the number of personal cars, in the last twenty years there has been an attempt to expand the number of roads and make them broad enough for a car. The local *panchayat* is petitioned to build a road or money is pooled to build a private road. In these cases, the party may be approached and local party members or loyalists may be called upon to ‘persuade’ someone to part with part of their land.

‘Big men’ in the neighbourhood units of political parties create competing circles of legitimacy.⁵ In areas dominated by one political party, members make a greater use of strong-arm tactics. Writing about clashes between party cadres of opposing parties in North Kerala Ruchi Chaturvedi says:

‘...[L]ocal politics ...is also about which group appears to be a major force in an area, which group has greater visibility and say in people’s everyday lives, whose name is displayed during neighbourhood commemorations and festivities, who are people compelled to turn to in times of need, and who becomes their means of accessing different structures of power. In this terrain of the local, alliances are made, friendships are forged, loyalties are produced, rivalries are generated and young men from various political parties become a force trying to steer residents in the direction of one group or another’ (Chaturvedi 2017).

This brings out well the way in which the workings of a political party intersect with local youth cultures and produce neighbourhoods in distinct ways (Chaturvedi 2015).

⁵ See Pardo (1996) on the working of ‘big men’ in a neighbourhood in Naples.

In recent months, north Kerala has been in the news for political killings across party lines — primarily between cadres of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] and of the Hindu nationalist parties RSS-BJP. Chaturvedi argues that the political culture is one driven by a majoritarian impulse — an ‘impulse to become major and make minor’ (2017). I would argue that revenge and a drive for masculine possession (of power, people or goods) seems to fuel this cycle of brutal violence, which is not restricted to killings between political rivals. These killings are illegitimate in the eyes of the constitution and are a violation of the right to life; in different cases, the law courts have found people on both sides of the political spectrum guilty of these murders. On the other hand, the language of martyrdom sets a parallel code of legitimacy at different levels of the political circles; that is, the local level, the state level, the national level and the international level.

The precarious nature of the neighbourhood was brought home to me during my visit to Devaloor in 2010, when I was documenting the World Cup fever there. In interviews with men in the neighbourhood library and the football club, they all spoke in veiled ways about how the football teams had gone and how young people stopped playing in the football club after the 2002 murder of a young adult who played in the neighbourhood football club. The murder is believed to have been carried out by party opponents. The football club has remained inactive for years, and for these young men the neighbourhood was not what it used to be.

Competing Circles of Legitimacy: Towards a Conclusion

At the level of the neighbourhood, legitimacy can be understood to be part of a woven fabric comprising strands of reciprocity, support and social control in everyday life. All these strands are intermeshed and form one complex picture. Furthermore, a look at legitimacy at neighbourhood level brings out not only shifts in centres of power and authority, but also competing claims of legitimacy and competing processes of legitimation. This is further made evident by the recognition that legitimacy at the local level is influenced by dynamics at different levels — local, trans-local, national and global. Moving away from the view of the state as the carrier of authority helps us to look at the dynamics of legitimacy among people in everyday life and the multiple directions in which legitimacy may flow. In contrast to Andrews’ findings (2018), then legitimacy does not emerge as a zero-sum game; instead, power is conceptualised as having multiple centres depending on the context. Looking at the dynamics in the space of neighbourhoods dramatically demonstrates how there are multiple circles of legitimacy (organised by caste, associations such as Resident Welfare Associations, political affiliation or muscle and money power, including the power of the gun) that intersect and may be in conflict with each other or with the state (see, for example, Pardo 2018, Boucher 2018).

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