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Republic of Affluents: Elite Informals and the cultural production of property in Delhi

In December 2019, the Indian parliament passed The NCT of Delhi (Recognition of Property Rights of Residents in Unauthorized Colonies) Bill. This bill granted ownership and transactional rights to 1,731 unauthorized colonies. However, it kept 69 “affluent unauthorized colonies (AUC)” out of that list. Previous theories have recognized the state’s role in the dynamics of informality. They emphasise that informality is a sphere where the elites are guaranteed unhindered access to land/property rights and in turn citizenship rights. However, they are yet to explain, how elite informals are able to exercise citizenship rights when the state explicitly deems their claims to property to be illegal. This dissertation uses Sainik Farm, an AUC in Delhi, to interrogate the contested relationship between elites and the state. By utilizing participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of newspaper archives, government documents, and court documents, it argues that elites exercise citizenship rights even in the absence of legal property claims. They negotiate their citizenship rights through their - 1) Institutional Practices, 2) Aesthetic and Spatial Practices, and 3) Ideological Practices. This form of ‘cultural production of property’ allows them to mimic elite formals who make citizenship claims based on property rights, and distance themselves from those who are seen as squatters and the undeserving poor. This research suggests that while the legal aspect of property rights can be a powerful tool (more so in case of poor informalized settlements) in the negotiation of citizenship rights, the everyday practices of cultural production of property through class mobilization cannot be overlooked.