The quest for inclusion: Nomadic communities and citizenship questions in Rajasthan

Mandakini Pant

Introduction

Citizenship has traditionally been cast as the universal legal and constitutional rights and responsibilities that are defined by the state on behalf of its citizens. However, concepts of citizenship based on universal rights and responsibilities do not in themselves guarantee equality of voice, access or influence within the state or in society. Instead, their interactions with particular identities may act as forces for the inclusion of some groups at the expense of others, and thereby limit the capacities of the latter to articulate and act upon their claims. There are a range of different sections of the population in the Indian context – the poor, low castes, tribals, women – who have not benefited a great deal from the rights provided by the constitution, or from the special provisions set up to rectify certain forms of historical disadvantage. The gap between the formal recognition of rights and their actualization remains substantial.

Renewed concerns about citizenship in recent times have begun to question the standardized formulation of rights within the legal, consti-tutional and political framework of the country from the perspective of those poor and marginalized groups who are extremely heterogeneous, whose relationships with each other are fluid and shifting, and who have a diverse range of needs and priorities. These concerns have helped to frame one of the research projects pursued by the Society for Participatory Research in Asia in New Delhi as part of its activities under the Development Research Centre. We had a number of questions that we wanted to explore through this research. Was the 'citizen' an abstract and passive subject upon whom the 'state' bestows

rights of access to resources and opportunities? Did the formal principle of equality upheld by the constitution promote substantive equality among its citizens, or did it simply gloss over the inequalities generated by the socio-economic positioning of different groups? How did the specific social positioning of citizens determine their experiences as citizens? How did citizens see themselves as citizens? How did they relate their identities as members of social groups to their identities as citizens? What processes strengthened the capacity of these groups to articulate their rights as citizens?

The research process

This chapter is based on one of two research projects that the Society for Participatory Research (PRIA) carried out to explore some of these questions – in this case with nomadic communities in Rajasthan.[1] Nomadic communities are made up of groups whose lives and livelihoods are based on pastoralism, foraging, artisanship, service, trade and limited agriculture, but who carry out these activities through periodic, usually seasonal, movements along long-established routes across the countryside. This research was carried out with the Gadiya Lohar, Banjara, Bhopa, and Bawariya communities in Alwar district in Rajasthan.

The research was organized around two key themes: the problems and priorities of nomad groups, including those that reflect their marginalized status as citizens and their attempts to organize collectively to address these problems. It was carried out in collaboration with Muktidhara Sansthan (MDS), a non-governmental organization (NGO) that works primarily with nomads in Alwar district. The organization, founded in 1993 by social activist Ratan Katyayani, is premised on the belief that the denial of land and shelter to nomads is tantamount to a violation of their constitutional rights, preventing them as it does from claiming their other basic entitlements as citizens. Our collaboration with the organization allowed us access to different nomadic groups on a basis of trust, as well as allowing us to observe MDS's attempts to organize them.

We began our research by discussing our objectives with members of MDS and with the nomadic communities they work with. We then met with members of these communities to discuss their problems and aspirations. We used a combination of focus group discussion, participant observation and in-depth, open-ended interviews to do this because we wanted to understand their experiences as citizens, or as non-citizens, from their own personal perspectives. We also interviewed

social activists, researchers, influential community leaders and key informants in the area to deepen our understanding of the issues. Meetings were then conducted with government officials at various levels within the district to elicit their views of their responsibilities towards nomads as a marginalized group.

This chapter reports on the findings of the study. The section following this provides some background to the study, explaining what it means to be a nomad in India: how nomads perceive themselves and are perceived by the wider community. I then go on to report on some of the problems and perceptions articulated by nomads related to how they see themselves and how they interact with the state, as well as with the wider community. I then examine some of the approaches adopted by MDS to support nomads in their quest for more inclusive forms of citizenship. The concluding section locates the issue of marginalized citizenship in the broader concept of citizenship.

Nomadism: a changing way of life

South Asia has the largest nomadic population in the world. They represent nearly 7 per cent of the total population in India, and consist of about 500 different communities of pastoralists, mobile herders, foragers and traditional peripatetics (Rao and Casimir 2003). In Rajasthan alone, there are about two dozen nomadic communities, each characterized by their own distinct livelihood practices and customs. The Bawariya are an example of a foraging community, whose principal economic strategy consists of gathering and collecting or hunting in the forests. Gadiya Lohar, Banjara, Nat and Bhopa are the 'service and technology' nomads of Rajasthan. The Banjaras are trading nomads dealing in salt, *multani mitti* (fuller's earth) and cattle. The Gadiya Lohars are blacksmiths. They fabricate and repair iron tools and utensils, moving shop from village to village. They get their names from their *gadiya* (bullock-driven carriages) and *lohars* (blacksmiths). The Nat are entertainers, performing at village fairs as acrobats. Bhopa are sacred specialists, singing ballads and reciting extempore poetry in worship of *pabuji* (a war hero) and *bhairav* (a demi-god). There are also pastoral nomads, who are economically dependent on livestock. They herd sheep and goats across their trail, and have developed institutions of property in herds, pasture and routes between pastures (Kovoori 1985).

Nomadic communities have generally followed a pre-determined cyclical course, regulated by the seasons, in their physical movements. Banjaras, for instance, moved to other Indian areas (Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat) along routes which