

**Making a case for urbanism in Bihar: Moral and material  
striving among Muslims and Dalits in Patna city**

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striving among Muslims and Dalits in Patna city**

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy to the



**Department of Humanities & Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Technology Delhi**

**Hauz Khas, New Delhi, 110016**

**June 2025**

## **Certificate of the supervisor**

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **Making a case for urbanism in Bihar: Moral and material striving among Muslims and Dalits in Patna city** being submitted by Abdullah A. Rahman to the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology for the award of **Doctor of Philosophy** is a record of bonafide work carried by him under my supervision. In my opinion, the thesis has reached the standards of fulfilling the requirements for submission relating to the degree.

The content of this thesis has not been submitted, in part or in full, to any other institute or university for the award of any other degree or diploma.

**Prof. Farhana Ibrahim**

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## Abstract

The eastern Indian state of Bihar is predominantly studied for its land and agrarian relations, migration and caste in politics. The state, one of the predominant sources of migration, is seen as a source of labour but rarely as a site of urban life. As per the metrics of urbanization, such as administrative and infrastructural, many of its settlements do not fulfil the criteria of urban. Patna, the capital city of Bihar, for long has been marked by administrative apathy and thus fails on the many markers of what an ideal urban life constitutes. Many scholars argue that the urban question in the case of Bihar has been sidelined due to the prominence of questions of caste and democratization. In this thesis, I proceed by critically engaging with scholarships that emphasize metrics of urbanization and markers of modernity and draw from bigger metropolitan cities or Western contexts to examine what constitutes urban in the context of Patna and Bihar. Lately, there has been an attempt by the state government and section of the elite to reimagine and redefine the region through infrastructural projects, consumerist avenues and projects of aesthetics such as paintings and photographs. However, in this thesis, I endeavour to look into and lay for the readers what exactly urbanity beyond the state-initiated and elite-led attempt at remaking and refashioning the region looks like. For this, I draw from my ethnography in the neighbourhoods between Bankipur and Patna City (Patna City here refers to old Patna at the eastern end of city of Patna). This stretch does not conform to the usual metrics of urbanization – infrastructure and global consumerist spaces, and neither has a legacy in terms of a strong urban past. The groups I focus on are Muslims and Dalits. These two groups I see internally differentiated on the basis of caste, class and occupation. In the case of Muslims, dimensions of sectarian practices and sensibilities of caste and class add additional layers of vulnerability and privilege, which inform the urban experience. I argue that the moral and material striving of Muslims and Dalits to make and secure a place for themselves in Patna city enriches our understanding of urbanity. Here, urban is understood not simply in terms of infrastructure and legacy but also through the everyday struggle of families and communities to navigate desires and deprivations of their lives. In this thesis, I attempt to explicate the urban life that Dalits and Muslims strive to secure for themselves from their unique positionalities. Urban life here constitutes physical space, opportunities, and a notion of belongingness cultivated from the different sensibilities and positionalities of caste, religion and class. Drawing from Dalit and Muslim experiences, I argue that in contesting ways, people attempt to enrich existing sensibilities of caste and sect, which informs the particular making of a

neighbourhood. Thus, the urban I see as a space of contesting articulation of moral and material interests marked by intensity of exchange and difference.

## सारांश

भारत के पूर्वी राज्य बिहार पर अधिकतर शोध भूमि, कृषि, जाति, राजनीति और प्रवास से जुड़ी समस्याओं पर केंद्रित रहा है। यह राज्य देश में मज़दूरी के लिए बाहर जाने वाले लोगों का एक बड़ा स्रोत है। ज़्यादातर इसे मज़दूरों के स्रोत के रूप में ही देखा गया है, न कि एक शहरी स्थान के रूप में जहाँ जीवंत शहरी जीवन बस्ता हो। शहरीकरण के मापदंडों, जैसे प्रशासनिक व्यवस्था और भौतिक अवसंरचना, को पूरा करने में राज्य की कई बस्तियाँ विफल हो जाती हैं। पटना, जो बिहार की राजधानी है, लंबे समय से प्रशासनिक उपेक्षा का शिकार रहा है, और इस कारण यह आदर्श शहरी जीवन की बुनियादी आवश्यकताओं को पूरा नहीं कर पाता। कुछ शोधकर्ताओं का मानना है कि बिहार में शहरी प्रश्न को वह प्राथमिकता नहीं मिल पाई है, क्योंकि शोध में जाति, प्रवास और राजनीति जैसे मुद्दों पर ज़्यादा ध्यान केंद्रित रहा है।

इस शोध में मैं उन अध्ययनों से आलोचनात्मक संवाद करता हूँ जो शहरीकरण और आधुनिकता के मापदंडों को पश्चिमी देशों के अनुभवों से तय करते हैं। इसके विपरीत, मैं अपने शोध में यह समझने की कोशिश करता हूँ कि पटना जैसे शहर के संदर्भ में शहरीपन या शहरी जीवन वास्तव में क्या होता है। हाल के वर्षों में राज्य सरकार और कुछ अभिजात वर्ग पटना और इसके आसपास के क्षेत्रों को भौतिक अवसंरचना, उपभोक्तावादी स्थलों और पार्क तथा कला जैसी सौंदर्यपरक परियोजनाओं के माध्यम से पुनःकल्पित और पुनर्परिभाषित करने का प्रयास कर रहे हैं। लेकिन इस शोध में मेरा प्रयास यह दिखाने का है कि शहरी जीवन आम लोगों की रोज़मर्रा की मेहनत, संघर्ष और आकांक्षाओं में कैसे प्रकट होता है।

इस उद्देश्य के लिए मैंने पटना के दो क्षेत्रों, बांकीपुर और पटना सिटी (जो पटना के पूर्वी छोर पर स्थित पुराना पटना है), के बीच के मोहल्लों में फील्डवर्क किया है। ये इलाके पटना के अन्य क्षेत्रों जैसे कि बांकीपुर या बेली रोड की तुलना में कम विकसित हैं और पारंपरिक शहरी मापदंडों पर खरे नहीं उतरते। मेरा शोध मुख्यतः दलित और मुस्लिम समुदायों के अनुभवों पर केंद्रित है। ये दोनों समुदाय भीतर से जाति, वर्ग और पेशे के आधार पर विविध हैं। मुसलमानों के भीतर भी जाति, वर्ग और मज़हबी आस्थाओं की विविधता है, जो उनकी शहरी स्थिति को और जटिल बनाती है।

मेरा तर्क है कि पटना में दलित और मुस्लिम समुदायों का अपने लिए स्थान बनाने और उसमें टिके रहने का प्रयास, शहरी जीवन की हमारी समझ को एक नई दिशा देता है। यहाँ शहर या शहरीकरण

का अर्थ केवल इमारतों और सड़कों से नहीं, बल्कि उन परिवारों और समुदायों के रोज़मर्रा के जीवन से है, जो तमाम मुश्किलों के बीच अपने सपनों को संजोने की कोशिश करते हैं।

इस शोध के माध्यम से मैं यह दिखाना चाहता हूँ कि ये समुदाय किस प्रकार अपने-अपने तरीके से एक 'शहर' को गढ़ने की कोशिश करते हैं, अपनी पहचान, रिश्तों और आकांक्षाओं के ज़रिए। शहरी जीवन केवल ऊँची इमारतों तक सीमित नहीं होता, बल्कि वहाँ भी बसता है जहाँ लोग विभिन्न अनुभवों, धर्म, जाति और वर्ग के साथ मिलते हैं और साथ मिलकर बेहतर ज़िंदगी की परिकल्पना करते हैं और उसकी ओर बढ़ने की कोशिश करते हैं। इस प्रकार, मैं शहरीपन को नैतिक और भौतिक हितों की टकराहट से घिरे, विविधताओं और आपसी लेन-देन की तीव्रता से चिह्नित एक ऐसा स्थान मानता हूँ, जो स्वयं दलितों और मुसलमानों जैसे समुदायों के संघर्षों और आकांक्षाओं से आकार ग्रहण करता है।

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