

## ***Accumulation by Possession: Political Economy of Urban Villages in South Delhi***

**Sushmita Pati**

Urban villages, embody quite their oxymoronic nature, as they sound. Neither have they been able to remain rural, nor have they been able to become urban and it is not merely a case of transformation from one to another. Urban villages of Delhi seem to be caught in the state of exceptionality, in the state of eternal contradiction almost as a part of their very existence. This peculiarity of its nature itself has lent to the curious modes of accumulation that operates in these villages today. These processes of accumulation are largely mediated but not subsumed by the processes of accumulation taking place in the city of Delhi.

It is the period after the land acquisition, roughly in the 1950s, which brought about a serious shift in the composition of the villages. With the loss of agricultural land and agriculture as a means of survival, these villages underwent a change that was almost unprecedented. It is this period where many were able to come to prominence and establish their businesses and often describe themselves as “self made men”, it is also the period where the people who enjoyed an older hereditary important position, lost that kind of prominence. Over a period of time, rent emerges as one of the easiest and safest way to earn money which remains the dominant way of earning here. However, institutions of *Kunba* (extended family) and *Gotra* remain important till date. Networks of capital run across not simply the family but also the *kunba* and *gotra* and finally that of the caste that is Jat<sup>1</sup>.

It is of interest here that when rent starts becoming a rather viable form of income and people start breaking down their houses to rebuild new ones which are multistoried with pigeonholes “one-room sets” to scores of people, they did not engage private builders in the process. It was entirely done with individual money. One very obvious reason why this happened was because involving private builders would mean losing control over their piece of “land” which meant control over a whole lot of political and economic decisions which can be taken given the fact that their land remains their source of both economic and political clout. In Shahpur Jat, it seems there was a decision taken at the Panchayat to not allow the private builders into the system as that would mean a loss of control over their land. Probably this is why potentially inflammable decisions like whether or not to let out houses to people from the North-East in Munirka and not letting the commercial tenants park in the Shahpur Jat parking lot can be taken very easily. In Munirka, however the Jats have themselves worked as private builders. The jats would approach some economically weaker people in the village and offered them that they could invest in building their houses provided they would let them use one or two floor depending on the levels of investments. This

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<sup>1</sup> The dominant caste group in many of these villages is either Jats or Gujjars. The two that I look at, both Munirka and Shahpur Jat are both dominated by Jats.

is also one way in which they have spread towards Buddh Vihar which is the Dalit side of the village.

The Resident Welfare Association in these villages too are rather interesting institutions which sometimes double up as Panchayats by being a strict group of only landowning men in the village. Many Dalits here feel that though the RWA does not formally keep them out of the RWA structure, it is largely an association of the landholding Jats. It enjoys social legitimacy by being referred to as the Panchayat, the president being referred to as the “pradhan” and a form of institutional legitimacy by having registered itself as the RWA. The Pradhan of Munirka himself says that a major responsibility of the RWA is to intervene and mediate in familial or property disputes in the village.

From these above mentioned strands, it will not be very far fetched to argue that kinship networks have got extremely well entwined with the networks of capital in these spaces. This is not to say that it is unique because of this precise reason. Business communities like the Marwaris and the Chettiars in Tamil Nadu have similar networks. But what makes this particular case unique is their spatial concentration which almost makes them as insider-outsiders in the city. Their evolution from an agrarian-pastoralist community to an entrepreneurial community is intrinsically linked with the story of the urban development of Delhi. Many tenants complain of they are regularly misbehaved with and are subject to arbitrarily increasing rents. The standard rate of electricity that residential tenants pay in Munirka is Rs. 8-9 per unit when the rate charged by government is only Rs. 5 per unit. In a way, the entire system, functions like a cartel which controls rent and works in a specific network. This entire narrative to my mind complicates the idea of an almost naturalized, pre-given category of the community which takes its organic-ness as almost given and opens up the possibility of looking at the covert ways in which capital itself on to consolidate a community.<sup>2</sup> The question of community, hereby understood merely a function of the social, can be understood as a crucial linkage in terms of accumulating wealth whereby wealth becomes capital. Wealth as capital therefore does this tenuous movement between the private and the public which makes the several convergences of capital and community possible.<sup>3</sup> This brings us to questions of new regimes of capital accumulation in the city spaces, which makes rent the mainstay of such an economy.

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<sup>2</sup> Maybe even the agrarian movements initiated by Mahendra Singh Tikait, Chauhary Charan Singh and Devi Lal can be seen in the same light whereby the need to consolidate around the idea of being from the agrarian classes to demand greater subsidies from the government while being a group of rich landed agriculturists can be seen as a part of the same continuum.

<sup>3</sup> Here I am referring to Hannah Arendt’s argument in *The Human Condition* which looks at how the notion of accumulation of wealth becomes socially acceptable or rather desirous and how this coincides with the rise of the “social” which blurs the hitherto clear cut distinction between the public and the private.