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Urban Space and Social Identity Production: A Study of Vasant Kunj in Delhi

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Abstract

Based on the Socio-Spatial Perspective, this paper portrays how residents socially construct meaning in their settlement spaces and how the built environment shapes social life via a qualitative case study of the Vasant Kunj settlement area in Delhi. This is useful to understand the intersectionality of space and identity in burgeoning urban areas to answer a most difficult question in social sciences of whether and how social, economic and identity integration can be achieved.

Keywords: Space, Identity, Socio-Spatial Perspective, Delhi, Vasant Kunj

Introduction

Getting rid of social-spatial apartheid† is, as yet, an unfulfilled human dream for peaceful social relations of coexistence, collaboration, and cohesion in a safe, stable, and just society. It requires mending conditions of social fragmentation, discrimination, conflict, and polarising social reproduction.

In relation to this meta-challenge, there is a burgeoning literature on how ordinary citizens and activists are working to solve urban social problems in ways that highlight the spatial aspects of the social problems they are working to solve; and how citizen organising through social movements can lead to changes in how

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† The intentional placement of marginalized peoples in isolated locations that make it difficult for them to access social, economic, and educational opportunities.

urban space is built and how social life operates in those spaces. Much of the writing on these lines is owed to the emergence of New Urban Sociology as a field of Sociology.

This new interdisciplinary approach considers urban areas as dynamic and complex social systems shaped by social, economic, and political factors. This is a progressive departure from the traditional study of urbanism that focused on cities as mere physical structures. It is powered by a fascinating Socio Spatial Perspective (SSP). This is a framework for studying urban social life that integrates sociological and political economy dimensions into the analysis of urban space and social life (Gottdiener et al., 2019).

This intellectual framing is inspired by the prodigious writings of the French humanist Marxist philosopher, sociologist, and urban theorist, Henri Lefebvre. His 1991 'production of space' contribution was seminal, albeit not easy to digest to begin with. Lefebvre had conceptualised a social space from three points of view. There is perceived or mental space referring to how we perceive the world through our senses, through being in the world. Conceived space or representations of space or discourses about space can be there even independently of its physical presence. This is the dominant space in every society, referring to how we understand space through our knowledge which is a mixture of our understanding and ideology. There is lived space or representational space, which overlays physical space and makes symbolic use of its objects, referring to the meaning that we attribute to space. This social space triad is useful as it has, for example, framed the political anthropological analysis of conflicts in the use of public spaces.

As King (2019) paraphrases, more understandably perhaps, the SSP focuses on the social production of space and examines how everyday life throughout metropolitan regions is affected by the interplay of cultural, political, economic, and social forces. It takes on a regional perspective (through multi-centered metropolitan regions) that looks at the role of the built environment on social life across urban and suburban settlement space; investigates how the global system of capitalism shapes the well-being of local areas; examines how government policy along with developers, financiers, and other actors in the real estate industry shape settlement space and social life; applies urban semiotics to illustrate how cultural

symbols and material objects organise everyday life across metropolitan regions; and understands both that spatial arrangements shape social interactions, and also individuals alter existing spatial arrangements.

This paper is influenced by SSP for framing its discussion on the intersectionality of urban space production on the one hand and social identity formation by caste, class, religion, gender, sexuality, etc., on the other. It draws on the work of Ayushya Kaul (2018) in the Indian context.

Delhi and Vasant Kunj through SSP

A brief review of Kaul (2018) is as follows.

The history of urban development of Delhi has seen a specific character of its residential planning with a trend toward segregation and specific production of spaces mediated by capital and state. This involved not a simple ghettoisation of Muslims and Dalits but rather inequitable access to the housing/residential market with a dialectical development of slum/squatter settlements. While discourse propagated by mainstream media has revolved around the 'unsightly' conditions of these slums, it has failed to penetrate the core of the issue. It has revolved around the idea of 'bourgeois environmentalism' where the idea of cleanliness is associated with the displacement of slums in the name of 'beautification' and establishment of 'greenery in the city' (which has been evident through campaigns such as 'Green Delhi, Clean Delhi'). The history of its residential settlement and the various phases of its changes from partition to Emergency to the entry of financial capital in the 1990s to the Commonwealth Games 2010 have crucially shaped the discourse and material interventions of urban planning authorities. The establishment of posh colonies, civil quarters, and physical infrastructure in already well-connected neighbourhoods was given priority over public issues of equitable access to health, sanitation, water, etc. This led the urban poor, in the face of shrinking public commons and spaces, to settle down in unauthorised colonies, slums, pavements, and any other place that they could afford. The displacement policy of DDA which acquired aggressive dimensions during the Emergency and especially in the era of finance capital

aggravated this problem. The three Master Plans have not only accentuated the contradictions of such urban planning through material interventions but the latest master-plan- discourse of 'world-class city' making involves a further propagation of such 'development by displacement'. This was composed of further abdication of the state's welfare commitment to the masses with the latest Master Plan Delhi-2021 encapsulating the neoliberal vision of urban development of metropolitan cities by highlighting the need for capital to play a greater role in urban planning.

The economy of Delhi came to be dominated by Punjabis (mostly Arora, Khatris, and non-Muslim Pathans) displaced by partition (from Western Punjab regions) with its historical Muslim population dwindling post-partition (with most of the current Muslim population being migrants from Uttar Pradesh). The erstwhile Punjabi refugees assimilated themselves into structures of power and soon became dominant in most economic spheres of life. They were able to afford and reside in planned colonies, having access to civic amenities that were not available to the majority of the population. They were able to engage in place-making and place-breaking practices across the city--from market centres (Punjabi Bagh, Khan Market, Connaught Place) to DDA-built residences (Lajpat Nagar, Greater Kailash, Faridabad). As such, all the aforementioned spaces in Delhi acquired a distinct character shaped by its Punjabi population. The spatial praxis of such residents is also reflected in the dominant discourse around slums.

However, the contradictory development of such urban development was the increasing marginalization of its working poor, who were structurally cut off from the system via class processes. As scholars working on spatial segregation using the ideas of Lefebvre (1991) have noted, this has not only involved a simple ethnic or religious-based creation of 'slums' but also the establishment of self-enclosed 'enclaves' (Susewind, 2018).

Vasant Kunj is a product of the urban development of metropolitan cities in India characterised by its exclusionary nature. The three master plans failed to provide adequate housing for the poor and the oppressed, which resulted in the simultaneous development of formal and informal settlements in Delhi. The outer parts of Delhi (where Vasant Kunj lies) came to the attention of

capitalist exploitation in the 1990s when land began to become scarcer and as a result, its market value multiplied. This was the historical moment when the financialisation and privatisation of the economy had begun on a fully-fledged scale. This was accompanied by a pattern of subaltern urbanisation, which saw the establishment of satellite cities such as Gurgaon, which became a huge attraction of real estate investment for capital and an alternative to the cultivated image of Delhi as a polluted and congested city (Dupont, 2016).

The Dalit population, which had exponential growth between 1971 and 1991, has witnessed a slowdown over the last two decades. The slum population of Delhi, over time, witnessed a centrifugal pattern that coincided with the peripheralisation of Dalit communities in the city. At the same time, during the past forty years, there has been huge growth in the slum population except for two distinct periods (1973-81 and 2001-2011). These two periods also witnessed a huge spurt in slum clearances and evictions: the Emergency and PIL-driven slum demolitions. These two phases took place in two different phases of capital accumulation: State-led capitalism and neoliberalism. The large-scale displacement of these two periods was enacted by two different actors: the state in the former and the Resident Welfare Association (RWA)--represented by 'middle class' residents--in the latter. The former involved the state itself leading the agenda of beautification of Old Delhi via such clearances and coercing people into sterilisation programs in exchange for the assurance of resettlements. The latter period was one of rapid financialisation of the economy, with land becoming increasingly commodified. Consequently, the politics of abjection was carried out by 'middle-class activism' (led by the RWA filed PILs) with a material intention of increasing their land value (Ghertner, 2011b).

It is in this wider context that the social spatiality of Vasant Kunj can be examined. This settlement lies in South-West Delhi, with the second highest proportion of Dalit population out of all the districts across Delhi. Moreover, some of this slum population resides in areas (such as Chattarpur) that are home to the domestic help who work in Sector A Pocket C Vasant Kunj (the site of this study). It was found that like most prime residential areas in Delhi, Sector A too is occupied predominantly by Punjabis (mostly Khatri and Aroras--

both upper castes) followed by Brahmins and Banias (the latter two castes being amongst the most influential in socio-economic structures of the country). The socio-spatial patterns as conceived by DDA, resembled most of the planned residential settlements in its vicinity, with an idea to spread social cohesion amongst the moneyed classes and inculcate a sense of discipline. These 'conceived spaces' were then appropriated by its residents with the hegemonic cultural ideas associated with Brahmanism (by establishing temples dedicated to Vedic deities, and celebrating particular Hindu festivals within the colony premises). This ensures the cultural reproduction of social relations. Similarly, 'conceived spaces' like community halls were also appropriated via the All Residents' Welfare Association's executive office and the residents themselves. These were not simply just 'recreational spaces'; they were also spaces dominated by celebration of national holidays. The celebration of the latter within the spaces of the hall also acted as a symbolic marker (a la temple/*mandir*) and ensured the social reproduction of the hegemonic narratives around nationalism. Similarly, spaces like the community park and the shopping complex were not merely recreational centres and grocery fulfillment spaces but rather contested by different actors (old residents versus young residents in the appropriation of park spaces; shopkeepers vis-a-vis shop helps and other service class personnel within the spaces of a shopping complex) for a different set of practices.

The spatial layout of the flats symbolised the ideological bedrock of caste (the 'marginalisation' of the toilet in flat architecture, an architectural 'outcaste') and signified Lefebvre's 'bourgeois homes', as also the repression of eros by making the split between the outward appearance and the details of the life led inside. The spaces within homes were appropriated by their residents to follow a discernible pattern with regard to managing household chores and domestic work. While most of the residents belonged to the Hindu upper caste background, there was no straightforward link between their negotiations with daily routines and their material realities. Assertion of their religious identity was strong but progressive intelligentsia within the community differed on this idea. However, some of them had assimilated themselves into the identity of a 'resident' despite clear religious and caste differences with dominant

discursive relations around the same. Domestic chores, while heavily mediated via hired labour, did not necessitate a complete dependence on them for all residents. The desire for a certain spatial order (for example, the need for cleanliness and tidiness) within homes meant that not all residents relied on domestic workers for the fulfillment of such desires. However, the crucial task of regularising spaces in the community area was carried out by the All Residents' Welfare Association (ARWA) and the dominant discourse around it was the issue of security and safety. This has been a part of a wider pattern of turning publicly built residential settlements into semi-private, gated communities in Delhi (Dupont, 2016). This involves cementing the bourgeois private 'inside' and demarcating it from the public 'outside' (Ghertner, 2011a; 2011b) in concrete and discursive terms. However, discursive relations around 'security' which are then floated around are not plainly propagated by all residents (despite its heavy importance in WhatsApp group conversations amongst most of the residents). Some of them realise the fallacy of feeling 'insecure' within gated neighbourhoods and recognise the need for more sensitive approaches to such issues.

The daily routines of Vasant Kunj residents, when contrasted with the material realities of actors residing in other parts of Delhi, yielded stark differences. Appropriation of dominated spaces is not only determined by one's residential settlements and spatial surroundings but also the material realities determined by one's caste and class position in society. As such, daily negotiations and rhythms acquire a dynamic character with respect to one's material realities.

Thus, both caste and class realities of residents shaped their everyday choices and appropriation of spaces which in turn were over-determined by the particular local history of urban planning and development of their respective residential settlements. Hence, there exists a dynamic and contested nature of appropriation of spaces within the city where caste and class codes get signified.

Methodology of Study

Connecting the contemporary debates on caste and discrimination, one can observe how mainstream literature on caste discrimination in labour markets has tended to view this problem through a rational choice framework with the individual as the entry point (Thorat, 2008; Papola, 2012; Akerlof, 1976). However, considerable literature has tried to connect caste with patriarchy (an idea inherent in Ambedkar) through the concept of 'brahmanical patriarchy'; with class (Ilaiah, 2004; Teltumbde, 2010; Guru, 2009) and thus, providing a methodologically holistic view of the caste system and its link to prejudice and discrimination. Mainstream literature tends to differentiate between 'ignorance' and 'prejudice', arguing that while the former is unconscious, the latter is a conscious act, especially in terms of hiring/firing, promotion, bonuses, etc. However, the heterodox literature has demonstrated that such binaries are false since a holistic view would recognize how both are essentially a structural phenomenon of institutionalised casteism. My work will not only look at the different segments of Vasant Kunj as simple agency-less individuals in a structure but rather as actors who are part of a system with some political agency.

This ethnographic work involved gathering and discussing information from respondents including residents, shop owners, private garbage collectors, and four individuals living in other parts of Delhi. It was buttressed by the author's own participant observation and experiential understanding as a resident of this community since childhood and also by making sense of official WhatsApp group conversations of Sector A Pocket C ARWA.

Ethnographic Notes on Sector A Pocket C, Vasant Kunj

The aforementioned socio-spatial understanding emerged from the 2017-18 fieldwork carried out by Kaul (2018).

The dramatis personae in the colony can be divided into four categories: residents, shop owners/keepers, domestic help/service class and outsiders. The resident is broadly identified as upper middle-class property owning or renting individuals who by virtue of property entitlement or by lease have gained access to certain

resources, facilities and privileges within the community. The shopkeepers are the ones who either own or have taken a shop space on lease in the accompanying shopping complex centre which is right opposite to a primary school called CDR Public School. Most of them have been around for a couple of decades and some since the beginning of the community itself while those who run the 'Mother Dairy' are the only recent faces amongst this set of actors. Domestic help/service class are all personnel who are employed as full-time/part-time house helps, drivers, gardeners, car cleaners, security guards, MCD sweepers, sweepers/gardeners employed by the RWA, electricians, and plumbers and so on. The label 'outsiders' is an all-encompassing term for anyone who does not fit into any one of these former categories.

Sector A was the first sector of the 'Vasant Kunj' residential scheme to be developed which had three subdivisions, Pockets A, B, and C. Pockets B and C are co-joined, having different entry gates but seamlessly merge once one goes inside, with no clear demarcation between the two. The mandir (temple) on the road connecting the two sides seems to be the dividing point and was constructed almost as soon as the colony was established. The park in the middle of these two pockets also acts as a point of confluence for the residents of the two pockets which are filled with manicured lawns, trimmed trees, swings, a walking path, and an open-air gym. The New Delhi Japanese School was also set up in 1991 in the same area just behind the mandir as a primary and secondary school for children of Japanese expats living in the city. Thus, some of the flats in the area have also been rented out to Japanese families. A casual look through the resident directory reveals that apart from a handful of Muslim households (also the odd Parsi household and a few Syrians and Goan Christians), most of the neighbourhood is home to Hindu or Sikh upper castes. In particular, there is an overwhelming majority of Punjabi Khatris and Aroras, followed by Baniyas and Brahmins. Across the road are D-1 and D-2 Vasant Kunj which were constructed around the same time as Sector-A's three pockets. Behind D-1 and D-2 is the Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences (ILBS) which was formally set up by the state government of Delhi as a specialized institute in 2010. There is also the Vasant Kunj DDA sports complex right next to a road adjacent to D-2 (across the Sector-A Pocket-B- B gate) which is replete with all high-tech equipment for

its gymnasium facilities, jogging/running track, swimming pool, and host of other sports. It was also established around the same time period (as ILBS) when the latest Master Plan 2021 was declared, around the mid-2000s. This could be seen as another attempt at securing the high and upscale neighbourhood credentials of Vasant Kunj. They perhaps work as symbolic markers for increasing the status potential of a space that is ready to accommodate the interests of the affluent and socially mobile classes. The land use was initially under 'Agricultural' purposes as per the original draft of the plan but was changed to accommodate the construction of ILBS behind D-1 and D-2 Vasant Kunj and the sports complex itself, consequently changing the land use to 'Public and Semi-Public' along with 'Recreational'. Thus, this is another glaring example of exceptions to master plans of urban development and what can be considered as an exception in the marked-out land usage. As the development of this sector finds no mention in any of the zonal development plans or Master Plan 2001 for that matter, only the first pocket of Sector B (i.e. B-1) is mentioned as a part of notified planned residential development anywhere. The ad hoc and piecemeal nature of the development of this colony can be understood by the fact that what gets notified is often different from the concrete actions taken on the ground by urban planning agencies in Delhi. While later sectors developed around the time of the Commonwealth Games (2010) still find some mention (like D-6 and D-7), none of the earlier sectors have a detailed layout mentioned in the Master Plan 2001.

The Socio-Spatial Layout of Sector-A Pocket-C

As one enters the main gate of Sector-A Pocket-C, one encounters two roads divided by a barrier made of cement and bricks. This orderly division of road indicates the DDA's idea to inculcate a sense of orderliness in traffic and discipline the moving bodies in norms of established driving rules and regulations (the left road goes uphill and the right one goes downhill; both are one-way roads). The community hall is the first thing on the left and then there are multiple entries to the big central park behind the blocks of flats right up until the end of the road, which ends in a T-point. To the left of the T-point, sector A extends till the mandir and to the right it goes as far as the gate separating the colony from the forest greens of the

ridge. The downhill side of the entry road has a garbage dump as soon as we enter the gate, perhaps symbolically placed at the margins of the colony spatial layout, and after a row of houses lies a large vacant space for parking adjacent to a public school. Often waste is dumped at the parking space next to the waste dump or next to the boundary wall behind the row of houses. This practice is not only followed by some residents but also some of the individual waste collectors and MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi) cleaners who often just dump collected leaves and other waste. Just at the entrance of the gate, there is a small guard shed with no attached toilet facilities. If they have to use the bathroom, they usually have to use the public toilet near the ARWA office adjacent to the T-point or the public toilet in the park (harder to access for security guards between 10 pm and 5 am since most of the gates are closed in this period). This practice of dumping waste at the 'margins' of the community is symbolic of how waste itself is an abjection for Hindu society. Waste collection and disposal have always been relegated to the 'margins' in such a society, relegated to the untouchable castes.

A constant source of annoyance and irritation that reverberated in the interviews with residents was how this sector was conceived by the planners and architects. One of the predominant spaces in society for Lefebvre (1991) is the 'conceived space' or representations of space. This is the "space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic sub-dividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent—all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived". However, this does not mean architects or planners working for DDA in designing this sector were merely producers but also themselves reproducing other spatial practices imbibed by other models or plans replicated elsewhere in Delhi. The main gist of the annoyance of residents with regard to the conceived space, which is often expressed on the WhatsApp group, is the lack of space to park vehicles given the narrow roads of the colony. This has led to multiple conflicts over double parking, demarcating or enclosing space for parking by residents (there is no legally assigned parking space) which is further exacerbated by the increase in per capita automobile ownership over the past three decades, causing spaces for parking to have become increasingly more valuable. Sector A was constructed at the cusp of the Maruti car revolution. Cars were not in vogue with the property-

owning middle-class back in the early 1980s. In fact, first-generation residents talk about how most of the early residents did not own any cars and were mostly reliant on public transport or a scooter in order to travel around. However, post the mass production of Maruti, everything changed. Earlier, when vehicular traffic was less, the residents could even play cricket or badminton (in what is currently the parking lot) but now the space to play has shrunk as it is encroached by cars, often resembling 'a junkyard'. This phenomenon has led to a remarkable shrinking of green spaces within the colony, such that small spaces that were earlier designated for children's recreation in the form of small parks were eventually encroached on by rising demand for parking space over the years, so much so that most of the spaces earmarked for casual strolls or just bird-watching have now disappeared. What perhaps remains from the planner's vision is the central park which is a point of confluence for residents of both the Pockets and the community hall. But 'conceived spaces' are only a vision being produced by the planner. What happens through human intervention, which is also a political intervention in space, is that they become 'lived spaces' which is a dominated space--a space which 'users' (in our case, the residents) seek to appropriate. Thus, the material demands of increasing social mobility of its residents led to an increasing number of mini-parks or green spaces being converted to parking spaces. This has not only led to residents encroaching on parking spaces of other households (since there is no proper designation) but also led to the phenomenon of 'double-parking' and incitement of anger in community residents at guests ('outsiders') who park their car within the community. In fact, one of the priorities of ARWA, according to the residents, should be the demarcation of parking spaces.

The park was built keeping in mind an idea of typical manufactured 'green' space like in any other a-priori existing planned residential scheme. It was absolutely deserted when the first-generation residents moved here, with no sign of any trees or grass, let alone a walking path. Today, the situation is very different. From its conceived state, the ARWA ensured the construction of jogging paths, swings for children, an open-air gymnasium, planting of multiple plants/trees, and multiple green patches to enable any kind of outdoor activity (football, cricket, etc.) However, place

making or appropriation of spaces by residents within the park has been diverse. While no such policy or rule exists regarding its usage by residents or non-residents, the clear demarcation of who is morally allowed to do so is clear. However, this is not so straightforward and appropriation of the space has been contested by different actors and individuals. The mornings are usually frequented by senior citizens who often gather as a part of various 'laughter clubs' or to just jog/walk around the park. In certain corners during the morning, one can even find middle-aged and senior citizens taking part in yoga sessions organized by *shakhas* (organisations associated with RSS, the Hindu right-wing paramilitary organisation). The afternoon time is the quietest in terms of footfall which gives ample opportunity for the service class of the community to often congregate for a game of cards under one of the shamianas during a typical hot summer and sometimes one may even find a labourer or two taking a nap. Away from the gaze of the residents, it is here where one can understand that it is through 'lived time' rather than linear time that differently conceived spaces at distinct points of time acquire different symbolic values and significance for different subjectivities. In the evenings, teenagers and children flock in numbers to either use the swings spread throughout the park or occupy the grassy patches to play their favourite sports. However, here is where inter-generational contestations over the use of public space come into play. The senior citizens (who comprise a significant proportion of Sector A's population) are often found sitting on benches in different corners, like to converse about everything under the sun from politics to health issues. This activity is usually detested by some of the other middle-aged residents as revealed by some of the residents in the interviews (the 2nd generation and some of the younger 1st generation residents), who feel it often functions like a pack of gossip mongers. Furthermore, some of the senior citizens openly display great irritability at children playing around them and this has often led to incidents of children being scolded away by some of them. This can be interpreted in the light of the senior citizens (and at times, other adults) asserting the common park as an 'adult space' where only adult-approved activities can take place. In this light, children and other teenagers can be seen proclaiming this space as a 'youngster's space' where one can assert themselves without adult

supervision. The vast size of the park and its multiple corners of green patches then offer the children/youth a great amount of freedom and anonymity- both being attributes that are highly valued (given the tight surveillance 'family space' of their homes). However, some adults do raise this issue from time to time on the WhatsApp group, insisting on the lack of parks and grounds for children to play sports or just play in general in Vasant Kunj. In this sense, one can understand the park as a contestation of 'conceived spaces' or place-making practices by different sets of actors where even residents get divided by the age factor.

The Community Hall of ARWA, right near the entry gate, was built with a vision similar to its purpose in other sectors of Vasant Kunj: a multi-purpose hall with a central vacant space, with provisions of a table tennis and carrom board inside the complex and a badminton court adjacent to it attached to a square-shaped lawn. The hall is the first thing on the left as one enters through the main gate of the community, signifying its importance as conceived by the architects to the social fabric of the community (with the obvious idea of community here being the residents and not other actors). Imagined by its planners for some very basic purposes, since then it has been appropriated by various different actors within the community and outside, to assert their social differences. The hall in general is for the specific and free use of the residents. The premises are usually leased out (it's colloquially referred to as 'booking') to third parties for different events such as marriages, parties, and banquets but can only be done so based on a guarantee or reassurance given by a fellow resident. Here, capital and money are shaping the appropriation of these spaces, especially in the wedding season when there is a huge boom in demand for wedding halls and vacant spaces at cheap rates. As such, the ARWA Executive office, acting as a representative of the residents, leases out the community hall to 'outsiders' based on a guarantee and security. In turn, this becomes an important source of revenue for the ARWA and its planned expenditure funding. This hall is a regular site of use by yoga practitioners early in the morning (all of whom are residents or instructors known to residents) and its gates remain closed until requested to be opened by another resident. The yoga practitioners are mostly middle-aged to old-aged residents who are either retired or semi-retired or homemakers. Thus, the usage and appropriation

of its spaces are strictly demarcated for residents. While there are frequent health camps, free clinics, and tuitions for under-privileged children which are often organized on a rent-free basis, the crucial link to access this space remains the resident.

Cultural Markers and the Appropriation of Sacred Spaces

The community hall as per the above analysis becomes a 'resident cum resident authorized' space where even multiple cultural festivals and celebrations take place within its premise: Diwali mela, Durga puja, Chatt puja, Lohri, Holi, and several others with the approval of ARWA or if backed or promoted by a resident. The specific religious tone of these festivals and celebrations is not a coincidence (Eid, Christmas or any other major religious festival has never been celebrated on the premises) but rather is a bi-product of the place making practices of the dominant Punjabi (Hindu and Sikh) communities which reside here. The hall is also used as a space to celebrate national holidays like Independence Day and Republic Day.

In the WhatsApp group, one of the residents posted the following in Hindi:

"On the birth anniversary of our constitution, I wish all Indians a hearty congratulations. Let us all respect our fellow Indian citizens and our constitution while keeping the resolve of Akhand Bharat alive. Today, we should also resolve to know, since we already know our rights and our duties towards the nation. Bharat Mata ki Jai, Vande Matram!"

Nowhere in the WhatsApp messages exchanged or the event held for Republic Day had any mention of Ambedkar, let alone his struggle towards establishing an egalitarian constitution and his lifelong struggle to ensure rights for the oppressed classes. Rather, the space was appropriated to celebrate the national identity of being 'Indian'. As the resident's message above illustrates, this pan-national identity has a specific political flavour for some of the residents where nationhood is elevated to colonial bi-products of nationalism, steeped in Western Europe's aggrandizing nationalism. The employment of Akhand Bharat in the message is a reference to the clarion call of the Sangh Parivar (the umbrella term for all

Brahmanical Hindu right-wing groups) to unite the whole subcontinent along the lines of a Hindu nationalist identity. The last two slogans raised by him are also the favourite coinages of the Hindu right-wing parties which have gained notoriety in the recent political climate for their overtly patriarchal tones. In this context, the hall is a representation of space (conceived and designed by DDA to serve specific purposes for residents) and a representational space (repurposed or appropriated by its residents to mark specific place-making practices) which observes specific spatial practices (leasing out on the rental basis for marriages, melas, events, processions which in turn yield revenue for the ARWA to further re-invest in physical/social infrastructure within the community; recreational activities for its residents so that they reproduce their labour power). Thus, there is a dialectical and dynamic relation between these triads of space. It helps assimilate the identity of residents under the larger umbrella of ARWA.

Another space that is crucial in this context is the *mandir* (temple) in the community. It is a crucial marker since it was established at the beginning of occupancy in the community itself, projecting a specific religious character to the identity of the community that would reside there. This was not only done in Sector A but even other sectors saw the establishment of Arya Samaj schools within their spaces right at the initial establishment of the community. For example: there exists a DAV school which exists within B-1 (next to Fortis Hospital) which as per DDA's website, was established in 1987 itself, roughly the same year when the settlement began. Thus, it was specifically conceived keeping in mind the predominance of the social space being produced as a 'Hindu Space'. The temple has expanded physically since then and has become an important site for the assertion of the Hindu identity by its Hindu residents. Most of the Hindu upper caste residents who were interviewed occasionally visit the temple in the community either frequently or on a ritualistic basis. But the religious festivals which are usually celebrated are also of a particular Brahmanical cultural hegemony. None of the Dalit-Bahujan festivals, such as Mahishasura Jayanti, is celebrated nor is there any acknowledgement of subaltern interpretations behind many Brahmanical festivals such as Holika and Diwali. The tenth day of Navaratri sees the celebration of Durga's victory over Mahishasura but for many anti-caste intellectuals, he becomes an

icon for the oppressed communities from the dalit-bahujan-adivasi folds. (Sonpimple, 2016). This is evident from the fact that festivals such as Holi are referred to as Holika Dhan by the RWA president and other residents in their messages on the official group. Holika Dhan is mythologised as the triumph of the worship of a Brahmanical God (Jamnadas, 2000). The importance attached to such Brahmanical celebrations is visible in posts such as this (original in Hindi):

"There are three meanings of Holi:

1. Our body, heart, wealth, time, and resolve all belong to god. All is given by god.
2. Whatever has happened has happened. The past is past.
3. Purity and its holiness.

Wishing you a holy 'holi'!"

An important appropriation of the temple space takes place by not only its residents but also the service class who choose to assert the dominant Brahmanical imagination of 'Hindu society'. Some of the service class even offer their prayers and blessings during testing times in their personal struggles (irrespective of the fact whether it is a festive period or not). Thus, the social space of the premises is not only appropriated by residents but also different actors across caste and class backgrounds which helps inculcate an idea of 'Hindu Cohesion', especially on the eve of religious festivals where 'Prashad' is handed out to all those who come for prayers within the premises. The temple's central location too gives it a powerful symbolic value in terms of cultural signifiers which play a role in perpetuating the myth of monolithic 'Hindu Society' and cultural reproduction.

Conclusion

Vasant Kunj, as our fieldwork and participant observations had found out, followed a typical pattern of urban development of planned residential settlements in Delhi: designed and built for affluent and moneyed classes. This did not require notification either in the Master Plans or zonal development plans of Delhi. It rather operated in the zones of exception (unplanned and not on paper) like

most of the urban development in Delhi. Over time, its status shifted from a place on the forested outskirts of Delhi to a prime location whose value of land has skyrocketed given the scarcity of land itself (which has grown over a period of time). This has ensured better connectivity and a huge improvement in terms of access to social and physical infrastructure for Vasant Kunj.

The residents, like in other planned residential settlements around Delhi, belong primarily to the Punjabi community with a distinct upper caste status of an overwhelming majority of its residents. The skilled service class belonged to the dominant Punjabi community. Meanwhile, guards, gardeners, and other low-skilled service classes (like domestic helpers) were migrant workers of both upper and lower-caste backgrounds. They are the working poor in terms of class processes. The shopkeepers had a distinct upper caste background which allowed them to access loans, funds, and rental opportunities to access employment and fructify entrepreneurial ambitions. However, the level of class mobility for all differed since ownership of property, local knowledge of the community, time spent running the business within the community and other factors over-determined the success of grocery shops like in the case of 'Krishna Store'.

The socio-spatial pattern of Sector-A itself reveals an attempt to inculcate and discipline the people in a certain manner while facilitating a specific religious- cum- caste cohesion (via mandir) and community cohesion via space for recreation for the residents (hall and the central park). However, neither of them was appropriated solely by residents. There were different contestations and challenges to its otherwise straightforwardly conceived spatial inception. The park saw the residents themselves conflicting with each other over the idea of it as an 'adult space' or as a 'youth space'. At the same time, it gave the service class a space to breathe, relax, and unfold away from the prying eyes of their prospective employers. Similarly, the mandir, while overwhelmingly a 'Brahmanical space', still provided a space for domestic help and the service class belonging to marginalised caste communities to come and appropriate its spaces to assert their 'Hindu' identity.

A detailed look at the ARWA WhatsApp group exchanges and their bank accounts reveals a particular discourse and concrete

attitude toward the idea of security and safety. It reveals a mindset identified in scholarly work as political abjection of the unsightly 'outside' by securing the 'bourgeois inside' against the 'outside'. This securing has taken place in Vasant Kunj much like how other planned residential settlements have been converted to gated communities to demarcate themselves socially and spatially from 'outsiders'. Moreover, security becomes one of the many other 'events' along with national holidays or Brahmanical festivals for residents across different castes or religious identities to assimilate themselves into the community. To this end, ARWA serves as a very crucial social lubricant for a residential community that is otherwise quite anti-social and non-interactive. Thus, the idea of 'security' becomes one of the crucial issues for residents to mobilise with pan-nationalistic tones in relation to national holidays.

This paper is carved out of a pioneering attempt at doing an interdisciplinary study from the ahistorical and desocialised ramparts of mainstream economics educational institutions in India. It has examined, using Lefebvre's framework, how the social identity (especially by religion cum caste) of the residents operates by examining their material realities and how they assimilate themselves into socio-economic structures of power entailing the dynamics of production of space brought about by the role of the state, state apparatus and capital. How Hindutva or Hindu nationalism has unabashedly embraced caste and successfully strengthened its vote banks by engineering communal divisiveness and conflicts in urban India can also be somewhat grasped as a byproduct of this study. And how depolarisation concerns via social healing and social capital formation are resurfacing now in social integration research as an antidote to expansionist Hindu nationalism can also be appreciated.

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