

In Delhi's Migrant Worker Settlements, the Poor Remain Poor

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The twin settlements of Kapashera and Narela are two large migrant hubs located in the outskirts of Delhi.

These have become home to thousands of migrants visiting the National Capital Region from across the country. These areas – with large scale semi-formalised settlements – developed from the rapid urbanisation of the Delhi NCR during the early 1990s. The economic opportunities the proximate areas provided for those finding it difficult to secure employment (including in the informal space) near their native villages also added to their popularity.

The workforce in these areas primarily consists of workers from neighbouring states of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Rajasthan.



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The research team at Visual Storyboards, the Centre for New Economics Studies, O.P. Jindal Global University, has conducted extensive ethnographic studies over the last two years within Kapashera and parts of Narela, employing both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in understanding the social topography, lives and livelihoods of

migrant habitats. So how do places like Kapashera and Narela represent themselves as a micro-cosmic reflection of the day-to-day life of a migrant worker in India's paradoxical and dualistic growth story?

This essay provides some observations.

Most interviewed workers are employed in the manufacturing industries that have set up in these areas, with Kapashera largely focused on textiles export, while Narela's Industrial corridor specialises in consumer goods like footwear and small-scale manufacturing commodities. These industrial hubs in the early 90s were envisioned as progressive, manufacturing areas to enable the movement of workers from rural to urban spots by providing employment to a significant number of migrant workers. However, the social geography of these areas is shaped by a variety of factors, including social structures and institutional barriers, which limit migrants from accessing better opportunities and integrating into the broader society.

Studying the urban form of Kapashera and Narela requires an understanding of social class, conceptualised by urban studies. The Bourdieusian theory of social class defines class as the possession of economic, social, and cultural capital. This method offers fresh perspectives on the professionalisation-polarisation argument, which looks at how the nature of labour is changing and how it affects social class differences.



It is important to consider other parameters that demarcate lines of differentiation among people and create a complex configuration of social structure. Photo: Jignesh Mistry

Occupational class is a commonly used indicator of class in the context of migrants in Kapashera and Narela. However, these broad occupational categories may not effectively predict cultural preferences and fail to capture the precarious forms of employment or underemployment experienced by migrant workers, including those who work on a part-time basis or migrant women in Kapashera who work on a per-piece rate.

It is important to consider other parameters that demarcate lines of differentiation among people and create a complex configuration of social structure.



The changes in the class structure of Kapashera and Narela can be observed by analysing their demographic composition. Photo: Jignesh Mistry

While conducting interviews, our research team aimed at clearly identifying the changes in geographical class divides and curated a questionnaire to examine how the class structure in Kapashera and Narela has changed over time.

Kapashera was once a rural area that has now transformed into an urban settlement due to its proximity to the airport and the growth of the service sector in Delhi. On the other hand, Narela was developed as a planned industrial area in the 1970s, but due to various reasons, including the lack of infrastructure and poor connectivity, it failed to attract industries and remained underdeveloped for a long time.

The changes in the class structure of Kapashera and Narela can be observed by analysing their demographic composition.

According to the Census of India, the population of Kapashera increased from 13,283 in 1991 to 64,635 in 2011, indicating a significant increase in urbanisation and migration to the area. Similarly, the population of Narela increased from 8,802 in 1991 to 85,764 in

2011, post expansion and re-location of industries. However, despite the increase in population, Narela remained largely underdeveloped and continued to have a lower level of infrastructure and amenities compared to other parts of Delhi.



The concentration of factories and workshops in this area highlights the role of industry in shaping urban geography and the dismal employment opportunities available to the working-class population.

Photo: Jignesh Mistry

A walk through the industrial area of Narela presents a very bleak picture, characterised by uniform-looking buildings and extremely basic living amenities. This reflects the impact of economic restructuring and globalisation on the urban landscape.

The concentration of factories and workshops in this area highlights the role of industry in shaping urban geography and the dismal employment opportunities available to the working-class population. The stark differences in the level of infrastructure and amenities between Narela and other parts of Delhi highlight the impact of social inequality on the lived experiences of different groups within an urban area.

The migrant worker population in Narela is largely cut off and separated from the mainstream urban Delhi, despite carrying the tag of living in Delhi. This demonstrates how social class can impact the spatial organisation of a city and the opportunities available to different groups.

The class structure of Kapashera and Narela has also changed over time. In Kapashera, the growth of the export sector has led to the emergence of a new working class population. This influx of migrants has also led to the growth of slums and informal

settlements in the area, which are predominantly inhabited by financially disadvantaged populations.

In the interviews conducted in Kapashera and Narela, several respondents discussed their socioeconomic status and their perceptions of the class structure in their respective communities.

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Munni Devi, a resident of Kapashera said, “We are a working class family. We don’t have much, but we make do with what we have.” Another respondent from Narela stated, “I belong to the labour class. We have barely have enough to get by, we simply cannot afford luxuries.”

In Narela, the [lack of industrial development](#) has led to many low income residents settling in informal slums. The lack of infrastructure and amenities in the area has also contributed to the lower socio-economic status of its residents. However, in recent years, there have been efforts to improve the infrastructure and connectivity in the area, which has led to some improvement in the living conditions of its residents.

Further, the government has launched various initiatives to promote Narela as a hub for industries and residential areas. As a result, the area has seen an influx of middle-class families and professionals, leading to gentrification. Gentrification has resulted in the displacement of the existing low income population in Narela, as they are unable to afford the rising property prices and rents.



In the case of Narela, cultural capital has become increasingly important in determining social status and economic opportunities as was evidenced through our field work in skill training centres and child education programmes held in Narela. Photo: Jignesh Mistry

Many low income families have been forced to move to further into the outskirts of Delhi, which are again, further away from employment opportunities and essential services. This has led to the spatial segregation of different class fractions in the area, with the middle class occupying the newly developed areas while the low income population is concentrated in the older and more dilapidated parts of Narela.

Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills, education, and values that are considered valuable in a society. In the case of Narela, cultural capital has become increasingly important in determining social status and economic opportunities as was evidenced through our field work in skill training centres and child education programmes held in Narela.

The emergence of new industries and service sectors in the area has created a demand for workers with high levels of education and specialised skills. This shift in the importance of cultural capital has resulted in the displacement of migrant lower and middle classes with low levels of cultural capital. These groups often lack the education and skills required to compete in the new job market, and as a result, they are often relegated to low paying jobs with little opportunity for advancement.

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Moreover, social structures and institutional impediments further restrict the opportunity and mobility of disadvantaged groups like migrants, which strengthens social class differences. Discrimination, lack of access to education, and limited social networks prevent these groups from gaining access to the resources and opportunities necessary to improve their economic and social status.

In contrast, classes with high levels of cultural capital, such as the upper-middle class and elites, can take advantage of the new economic opportunities and secure their position in the upper echelons of society. They have access to better education, social networks, and cultural resources, which enable them to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in the new job market.

In Kapashera, a similar pattern of cultural capital is evident. However, the social and economic landscape is different, with a larger population of migrant workers and a higher concentration of low-skilled industries. The displacement of migrant lower and middle classes with low levels of cultural capital highlights the importance of education and skills in the new job market. Social structures and institutional impediments restrict the opportunity and mobility of disadvantaged groups like migrants, which strengthens social class differences.

Circling back to the observations made in the Bourdieusian theory of social reproduction, social inequality amongst the elite, the middle class and the working class of Delhi is perpetuated through the transmission of cultural capital and the unequal distribution of economic and social resources.



The institutional and social systems that restrict the mobility and prospects of underprivileged people in Kapashera and Narela are complex and intertwined. Photo: Jignesh Mistry

Applying a Bourdieusian approach to understanding the urban class structure in Kapashera and Narela can make it evident how economic, social, and cultural factors interact to produce various forms of exclusion and marginalisation, shaping social class.

The cultural, social, and economic resources available to individuals in these areas shape their social class and their opportunities for mobility. Lack of affordable public transport from these areas to the rest of the city, for instance poses a huge barrier for upward social mobility. Even when equipped with niche skill sets and recruited by employers through non-governmental interventions, individuals in these areas rarely take up jobs in higher paying sectors due to the difficulty in commuting.

During our interviews at Navjyoti Foundation, an NGO in Narela-Bawana area that provides skill training to youth coming from poorer, impoverished neighbourhoods, we found that most of them were hesitant in taking up jobs in Gurgaon or Noida where most of the companies were located.

The commute was long and expensive, and affordable housing was an illusion in these areas which are made for the upper class. Dominant cultural groups have more access to formal education, cultural institutions, and other forms of cultural capital that can help

them achieve higher social status. This further perpetuates the vicious cycle of poverty and ensures the status quo of the class system.

The institutional and social systems that restrict the mobility and prospects of underprivileged people in Kapashera and Narela are complex and intertwined. Addressing these issues requires an understanding of how economic, social, and cultural factors interact to shape social class. Policies and interventions based on Bourdieu's perspective could focus on increasing access to formal education and cultural institutions, supporting the development of social networks and social capital, and addressing economic inequalities that limit opportunities for upward mobility. By adopting a Bourdieusian approach, policymakers can better understand how social class is shaped and how it can be addressed.

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