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A Sheikh colony in Srinagar. Photo: Screenshot from YouTube video/ Centre for New Economics Studies

This is the first part of a three-part series of field essays penned down by the Visual Storyboard team of Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), O.P. Jindal Global University, working in Kashmir for a manuscript project focusing on new sub-altern voices of communities from the Valley. This series highlights observations made in the team's interviews with 'Watals' in Sheikh Colonies.

This study delves into the socio-economic landscape and urban marginalization experienced by the Sheikh communities residing in colonies adjacent to the historical wall built by the *Mughals* in the sixteenth century around the Hariparbat Fort in Srinagar. Based on the ethnographic investigation of this space amidst an urban setting, the research explores the social history of the Sheikh Colonies, housing conditions, infrastructural deficiencies and everyday experiences of vulnerabilities of the inhabitants in these colonies.

Through in-depth interviews and focussed group discussions with the research participants (inhabitants of Sheikh Colonies), the research unveils a multifaceted fabric of social and economic obstacles intricately interwoven with cultural customs, leading to the exclusion of this community from the developmental process. Themes such as socio-economic disparities, spatial segregation, housing inadequacies, and caste identity are elucidated to understand the multifaceted dimensions of urban marginalisation within the Sheikh colonies.

The Sheikhs, who are primarily associated with their livelihood with leatherwork, scavenging, and numerous menial occupations, experience social exclusion and marginalisation because of their occupation. Identified as a 'lower' social-caste group within the Kashmiri Muslim society, the main occupations of members of the Sheikh community are leatherwork, scavenging, and numerous menial occupations.



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/jYeRsn2DVTM>

Due to their categorization as a community associated with 'impure' and 'dirty' work, the Sheikhs experience social exclusion and marginalisation. Although the socio-economic and education status of the community has improved in the last few decades amidst state intervention and policies, this progress is slower compared to other segments of society. However, the forces of modernization and evolving societal norms provide optimism for a fairer and more emancipated future, steadily dismantling the remnants of caste-based prejudice and economic exclusion.

As part of the Visual Storyboards initiative by the CNES, our research team conducted an extensive field study to investigate the daily challenges and resilience of the Sheikh community residing in Srinagar and also gain insights into the socio-economic dynamics, living conditions, and daily experiences of the Sheikh community through direct engagement and observation within their residential areas.

Our fieldwork encompassed visits to various areas inhabited by the community, including:

1. Sheikh Hamza Colony, Amda Kadal Zahidpora
2. Kani Dewar Sheikh Colony, Sangeen Darwaza
3. Sheikh Colony, Bachi Darwaza Makhdhoom Sahib
4. Sheikh Colony, Androoni Kathi Darwaza Makhdhoom Sahib
5. Tujgari Mohalla, Malkha Kathi Darwaza Makhdhoom Sahib

Sheikh colonies

The Sheikh colonies nestled along the historical wall called Kalai of Hari Parbat Fort in Srinagar offer a microcosm for examining urban marginalisation in Kashmir. In memory of most of the old generation of the colony, the origins of the Sheikh colonies are traced back to the times of land reforms in Kashmir in the 1950s, initiated by Sheikh Abdullah, who temporarily allocated this space for the residence to Sheikh communities.

This oral narrative is supported by the archival sources, which provide evidence that it was initially the Dogra administration who brought the members of the Sheikh community from the villages to different parts of Srinagar city to work as cleaners and scavengers, and later provided them with separate space at the present day Sheikh colonies. Despite promises of separate land plots, the Sheikh communities continue to inhabit congested colonies sandwiched between Kalai and upscale neighbourhoods.

These settlements have evolved into congested neighbourhoods characterised by inadequate infrastructure and socio-economic disparities. Even though the community has lived in the Sheikh colonies for decades, none possess property rights or ownership of the land.

When asked about the ownership of the houses, one of the research participants responded, "The government has not allotted it, but it was during the tenure of Sheikh Abdullah that the government permitted us to reside here temporarily, and we were promised a separate plot of land. It's said that Maharaja (Dogras) originally brought us here. Meanwhile, many people living in close vicinity complained to relocate us. However, Sheikh Abdullah had asked them to let us live here temporarily."

Another respondent added, "I remember my grandfather telling me that people here came from the villages. He used to say that we came from the Bijbehara area of Anantnag. We have been here for decades now."



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/drQ60khWAVQ>

What is in the Name – Discrimination

Since most of the inhabitants in these adjacent colonies and *mohallas* belong to the same community, who engage in cleaning, scavenging and leatherwork, this whole area comprising of different *mohallas* is called 'Watal Colony' by the outsiders.

Most of the community members interviewed during this research strongly opposed referring to their residential area as a 'water colony'. Instead, they prefer to call themselves Sheikhs and the area as the Sheikh Colony.

About this terminology of the area, a research participant from the community responded, "*Sheikh dapaun chu asel, Watul chu gashan wyoth* (The term Sheikh is better. Watul becomes a bit derogatory)."

One young person who works in Srinagar Municipal Corporation as a sweeper pointed out that "people from the 'high' caste in the Srinagar city call our colony with this derogatory term. If I ask you if it's right? We are not ashamed of our profession, but all human beings deserve to be called with respect. This mohalla was named after Syed Tajidin (Spiritual person) as Tujgare muhalla, yet they call it Watal Mohalla."

There is a strong sense among the members of the community that their occupation as sweepers, scavengers and cobblers invites derogatory remarks from the 'high' caste Muslim neighbours. On the one side, they are not ashamed of their present occupation, while on the other, they aspire to better professions for the new generation of the community.

An elderly woman from the community who finds the word 'Watul' associated with negative connotations said, 'Allah has not made us into Watul, Sheikh, Mir, Peer, Syed and Dar; rather, He made all of us as equals. These social caste and zaats are made by humans themselves. What is wrong even if we clean someone's dirt and waste products? We have its reward with Allah, and this is our means of income. If we do not clean, the whole city will stink'.

To resist the derogatory remarks, some of the community members were of the opinion that the original nomenclature for them was *Watanwul* (caretaker), which, over the years, degenerated to '*watul*'. There are social castes among the Kashmiri Muslims who followed the process of *Sanskritization* and changed their surnames and professions to emulate the 'high' caste Muslims. But no such process was visible among the inhabitants of the sheikh colony. They think that if they change their surnames, then the 'high' caste narrative about them as being dirty and unclean would become valid.

Housing – Limited social spaces

The colonies lack strategic organisation and structure, leading to a disordered and physically unattractive setting typical of impoverished urban areas. The lack of adequate urban planning has resulted in widespread unplanned housing, exacerbating these regions' disordered and unhygienic state.

Upon arrival in these colonies, individuals are promptly greeted by a striking juxtaposition with the neighbouring affluent communities, evoking a feeling of displacement from the customary atmosphere of Kashmir. The housing conditions within the Sheikh colonies are marked by congestion, substandard infrastructure, and poor sanitation. Occupied by joint families, one or two-storey houses stand adjacent to each other with limited ventilation. Narrow lanes, lack of proper drainage systems, and overflowing open drains exacerbate the unsanitary living conditions.

Moreover, inadequate roadways hinder emergency vehicle access, posing significant challenges during medical emergencies. One of the respondents from Tujgari Mohalla said, "There was an emergency when a pregnant woman went into labour and she had to go to the hospital. Due to narrow passages in alleys, the ambulance couldn't reach her house. So we had to carry her to the main road to get into the ambulance".

Discrimination and neglect manifest in the form of inferior amenities, congested living spaces, and lack of public-private demarcation, perpetuating the marginalisation of the Sheikh communities. Our respondents added that the water they receive smells; one of the respondents said, "The water is scarce. First, we get water for only a few hours, then it stinks. Sometimes we go to Gojwara to get drinking water".

Spatial segregation: Us and them

The Sheikh colonies exhibit signs of spatial segregation and communal identity, with stark contrasts observed between the infrastructure and cleanliness of these neighbourhoods compared to adjacent upscale areas inhabited by 'high' caste Muslims. There is a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them' between the residents of Sheikh colonies and members of 'high' caste Muslims in the neighbourhood.

The minuscule 'high' caste members who reside in these colonies keep referring to the members of the Sheikh community as 'them', showing a clear division based on identity. There is very little social interaction between the two communities.

Members of the Sheikh community validated this point by saying that people from the 'high' caste neighbouring colony do not visit them on social occasions like marriage or death. One research participant added, "They don't invite us to weddings, neither do they visit if someone has died. We sometimes go to condole death in their families, but they never come here".



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/i6yluDyAMMQ>

This distinction is also reflected in the religious spaces. Narratives from the residents of the Sheikh colony highlight that even the religious spaces, like mosques, were not free from discrimination and stereotyping against the members of the Sheikh community.

A young resident of the colony shares his childhood memory and says, "I remember in my childhood days, whenever a shoe was missing in Masjid. All eyes would stare at us, and we would be accused of stealing. They used to doubt us. Then, we never went there for prayers. Gradually we built our own mosques here in this colony."

The Sheikh colonies have their mosques. "We have separate masjids, and 'high' caste individuals are rarely seen there," added a research participant.

Although discriminatory practices such as untouchability at the hands of 'high' caste members are not explicitly experienced by the members of the Sheikh community, the hierarchy based on social caste comes to them as a 'hidden transcript'.

While talking about the relationship with the 'high' caste neighbours, one research participant said, "on the surface, these 'high' caste people treat us well, but there is still hidden discrimination. They treat us differently. They don't say it on our faces, but we can feel it."

Everyday life – Vibrancy in colonies

Socio-economic challenges, limited access to basic amenities, and a sense of exclusion from mainstream society characterise the daily life experiences of inhabitants of Sheikh colonies. Lack of private space, congested houses, and unhygienic conditions underscore the pervasive nature of urban marginalisation within the colonies. Despite the spatial challenges, the Sheikh colonies exhibit a vibrant and energetic ambience reminiscent of a market environment, where youngsters partake in leisurely pursuits such as cricket and traditional sports like Kho Kho and hopscotch on the streets.

Women are commonly noticed gathering in collectives and participating in conversations outdoors, while others are engrossed in household chores such as laundering, so introducing the fragrance of detergent into the atmosphere. It was observed that, unlike other communities, the youngsters spend less time on their phones and watching TV; they spend more time in social gatherings in different spaces in the colonies.

Men frequently participate in diverse professions, such as metalworking in small copper businesses, resulting in a symphony of impressive sounds. Furthermore, there are places where male and female owners run their businesses, including a prominent shop decorated with a portrait of Shamas Faqir, a celebrated Sufi poet, and depictions of Islamic monuments, potentially indicating religious veneration within the community. Amid the bustling city, a meticulously arranged birdcage suspended from a rooftop provides a brief view of the natural world, strikingly contrasting the tumultuous urban environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Sheikh colonies in Srinagar exemplify the complex interplay of historical legacies, socio-economic disparities, and spatial dynamics that perpetuate urban marginalisation. Addressing these systemic inequities requires comprehensive interventions to improve housing conditions, enhance infrastructure, and promote social inclusion within marginalized communities. Only through concerted efforts can the cycle of urban marginalisation be broken, fostering a more equitable and inclusive urban landscape in Kashmir.

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