

The Watalas of Srinagar: Identity and Resilience in a Marginalised Urban Context

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This study conducted by CNES examines the socio-economic circumstances and urban exclusion experienced by the Sheikh groups residing in colonies adjacent to the ancient wall built by the Mughals in the 16th century around the Haariparbat Fort in Srinagar.

This research utilises an anthropological perspective to investigate the social history, housing conditions, infrastructural deficiencies, and daily experiences of vulnerability among the people of the Sheikh Colonies. It uncovers an intricate web of social and economic obstacles, intricately linked with cultural traditions, ultimately hindering this community's process of progress. The investigation was conducted through comprehensive interviews and targeted group discussions with the locals. The Sheikh colonies offer an opportunity to examine different facets of urban marginalisation, including socio-economic disparities, spatial segregation, insufficient housing, and the impact of caste identity.



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

Historical Context and Origins of the Community

The Sheikh communities, situated adjacent to the historic Kalai of Hari Parbat Fort in Srinagar, provide a distinctive insight into the phenomenon of urban marginalisation in Kashmir. The founding of these colonies can be credited to the land reforms in Kashmir during the 1950s, initiated under Sheikh Abdullah. He temporarily designated this area for the habitation of the Sheikh community, as recollected by the older generation of the colony.

Archival materials confirm oral narratives, revealing that the Dogra administration initially sent members of the Sheikh community from villages to different parts of Srinagar city to serve as sanitation workers and waste collectors. Gradually, they were assigned a distinct region, currently referred to as the Sheikh colonies. Despite having lived in the community for an extended period, none of the members have legal documents or ownership of the property.

The inhabitants of the Sheikh colonies encounter substantial discrimination, usually due to their social class and profession. The neighbourhood is commonly labelled 'Watal Colony' in a derogatory manner by outsiders, a moniker that the community vehemently disapproves of.

“We only know this. People refer to it as Sheikh Colony when we are around. Even they don't say Sheikh colony in front of us. Why would they say... doesn't a Sheikh share the same Kalima as others?”, added a respondent. They self-identify as Sheikhs and prefer

being referred to by the name of the *mohallas* they live in. This labelling represents the community's efforts to combat negative stereotypes associated with its traditional professions, such as sanitation work, waste collection, and leather craftsmanship. The community members exhibit a sense of satisfaction in their employment, however they yearn for dignity and respect.

“They call *watul* to someone who sweeps. In the morning while Elites are sleeping, it's *watul* who cleans the roads, according to the upper-class perspective. For me every work is the same”, said one respondent.

They also express a need for the younger generation to aspire to more esteemed professions. The social isolation and prejudice experienced by those of lower castes and occupations are perpetuated by the stigma attached to their social status. This stigma not only affects their relationships with upper-caste neighbours but also reinforces their perception of being marginalised.

Housing and Living Conditions

The housing conditions of Sheikh colonies are marked by excessive population density, insufficient infrastructure, and substandard sanitation. The lack of deliberate urban planning has resulted in haphazard and disorganised housing, worsening the disorderly and unhygienic circumstances. The high population density of the communities, along with their limited roadways and insufficient drainage systems, poses substantial issues for the residents.

Emergency vehicles frequently encounter challenges when accessing these regions, presenting significant obstacles during medical emergencies. Moreover, the water supply is limited and occasionally emits unpleasant odours, further emphasising the lack of attention given to the infrastructure in these areas. These living conditions exemplify the wider socio-economic disparities and disregard that lead to the continuous marginalisation of the Sheikh communities.



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

(Marginalised) Space and Identity

The Sheikh colonies exhibit evident spatial segregation and communal identity, characterised by significant differences in infrastructure and cleanliness as compared to adjacent affluent regions primarily inhabited by 'upper' caste Muslims. This segregation engenders a clear demarcation between the inhabitants of Sheikh communities and their upper caste counterparts, leading to limited social engagement and a feeling of isolation.

“They (upper caste neighbours) don’t invite us when they have any functions nor do they visit at the time of death, earlier we used to visit but now we usually don’t”, said an interviewee. Another added, “there are some who are good to us but mostly they look down on us.” The spatial and social segregation of the Sheikh communities further solidifies their exclusion from the broader community.

Daily Life Experiences and Interpersonal Relationships

Sheikh colony members face socio-economic hardships, limited access to essential services, and isolation from mainstream society. Although living conditions are difficult, the colony displays a vibrant and energetic ambience, with children playing outside and people busy with their daily lives. The colonies have a robust sense of community, fostering mutual assistance and unity among the inhabitants.

A participant replying to a question on community solidarity added, “We are not rich people but we help each other in tough times, even if it is a small amount we still don’t stay back (in helping)”. Nevertheless, the difficulties posed by excessively populated residences, insufficient sanitation, and restricted availability of crucial services emphasise the continuous battle for improved living circumstances and societal integration. Adaptability, coupled with a strong sense of community, is essential in overcoming these problems and creating a feeling of belonging despite being marginalised.

Access to Utilities and Government Services

Although the residents of Sheikh communities have access to power and tap water, they consistently encounter problems with the inconsistent provision of these services and the increasing expenses associated with them. The water supply from Dal Lake often smells foul, giving rise to worries regarding its quality and hygiene. Moreover, the exorbitant water and electricity costs place a substantial economic strain on the neighbourhood.

“Water is not good. It is dirty water. People get ill due to it. Water is supplied from the river (Dal Lake) from the Rainawari side. We pay water bills of 1100 to 1200 rupees. We have less electricity supply especially in winter”, one participant mentioned. The locals suffer even greater difficulties due to the scarcity of energy, which is only available for a few hours each day. These problems are a result of the overall disregard and insufficient provision of infrastructure for the Sheikh communities, which continues to keep them socially and economically marginalised.



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

Exclusion and Resilience—Resisting Forced Eviction

The community lacks ownership rights of their homes. The present circumstances can be perceived as a failure of Sheikh Abdullah's Land Reform, as it did not sufficiently grant land ownership rights to the Sheikh community.

The Smart City project, which seeks to rejuvenate and save historical landmarks, has presented a potential risk of displacement for the Sheikh population residing in their current homes. The community has strongly protested against these eviction attempts, insisting on the provision of appropriate land as an alternative. The resistance to displacement underscores the continuous fight for land rights and socio-economic justice. The unwavering struggle of the Sheikh community against eviction highlights their dedication to safeguarding their homes and cultural legacy, underscoring the need to address the structural inequalities that lead to their marginalisation.

Despite facing animosity and socio-economic obstacles, the Sheikh community has shown remarkable tenacity and determination. They have a strong sense of pride in their profession and firmly oppose any efforts to change their caste classification. The opposition stems from a profound yearning to confront and repudiate the unfavourable generalisations promoted by the privileged social group. The members of the Sheikh community maintain their caste identity, regarding their labour as a worthy pursuit deserving of attention and acknowledgement. They depend on their robust communal networks, which revolve around the *mohalla* (local neighbourhood) and the masjid (mosque) committee, for assistance and unity when confronted with prejudice and challenges.

Summary

The Sheikh colonies in Srinagar are a prime example of how historical legacies, socio-economic inequities, and spatial dynamics lead to continuous marginalisation in urban areas. To tackle these structural gaps, it is necessary to implement comprehensive policies that specifically target improving housing conditions, infrastructure, and social inclusion for disadvantaged people.

The account of the Sheikh community in Kashmir highlights the long-lasting impact of bias and the continuous struggle for acknowledgement, parity, and socio-economic advancement. Despite the obstacles they encounter, the Sheikh community maintains its resilience, bound together by their common past and ambitions for a more promising future. Their narrative is evidence of the resilience of marginalised communities in the midst of challenges and the importance of inclusive urban development programs that prioritise the well-being of all residents.

[This is part of a series of field essays penned by the Visual Storyboard team of the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), OP Jindal Global University. They are working in Kashmir on a manuscript project focusing on new subaltern voices of communities from the Valley. This essay highlights observations from the team's interviews with 'Watals' in the Sheikh Colonies. The authors extend their gratitude to Irfa Anjum, Hamreen Khan, and Rekha Pachauri for their invaluable support and assistance with field interviews. Video Essays from this project are accessible here.]

Video Credits: Rajan Mishra

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