

## Exploring identity and space through the study of housing rental market in Delhi

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A story that became a common trope during my fieldwork while talking to brokers in Munirka who are mostly Jats was about how Munirka is being overtaken by people from Northeast or 'Manipuris'. A common trait in this story was the street inside Munirka village known by many names by the residents. But the name 'airport' was the most sensational one for brokers of all the names. The Jat brokers used to say they (people from Northeast or Manipuris) have named this *chowk* as 'airport' putting an emphasis on the changing nature of the space. How they are overcrowding the place and occupying it with their presence which means an overt presence of them. It is interesting to note at the same time 'airport' which is known as the Babulal Chowk otherwise, has most of the tenants from northeast living there. The street starts from Anupam restaurant located towards the Palam Flyover side and ends inside the Munirka Village at Babu Lal Chowk has most of the shops and buildings rented by the Northeastern community. The Jat brokers signified at the same time a loss of connection with the space where people from Northeast have established themselves inside the village.

Munirka is an urban village and it has a sprawling flow of tenants across the village from various regions of the country. On its one side, it is very close to Jawaharlal Nehru University and on the other hand it is easily connected to various parts of the city and Gurgaon also. And with Metro extending through this area the dynamics would be changing more. The most interesting part of the story was when the brokers were asked why they named it as 'airport'. Most of them said we don't know and they (Manipuris) named it because they straightaway come from Northeast and stay here with their relatives and friends. During the conversations with tenants who were from Northeast in the street spread from Anupam restaurant and Babu Lal Chowk. There were different narratives that one got to hear from them. One of the narratives was that in the initial years when people from Northeast started living in Munirka. The Babulal Chowk during the monsoon season used to overflow with the sewage of the drains. There were human feces and sewage littered around the chowk. So they used to call it 'Ak-pot' which in their local lingua signified a place filled with shit or sewage. And the local Jat community couldn't understand this word and they misunderstood it as 'airport' not 'Ak-pot'. Other narrative was that when a person from northeast arrives in Delhi, they are asked to drop at Anupam restaurant which is situated towards the Palam flyover road. From there they are told to walk straight to the street till Babu Lal Chowk. The street till Babu Lal Chowk is very narrow and it suddenly opens up at Babu Lal chowk making the space more open, spacious and airy. Then from here they are picked up by their friends and relatives and taken to their rooms. So this place signified an 'airport' for them.

The different narratives tell us how a small street becomes a contested space as the population migrates into a city. How a name in itself brings with itself different narratives of imagining a space with the narrative of belongingness with the city and a sense of loss with their region. At the same time, it becomes a story for the Jat community losing of their culture, control and assertion on the space. In this story, lies the history of their migration, conflict, violence and differences which at the same time emerge as they associate themselves with the city by creating a space of their own which they call as 'home'. The narratives in itself brings in different dynamics of housing and living in a city for those who have migrated from other regions especially from Northeast and are settling in Delhi (McDuié-Ra, 2012).

During my fieldwork in Jamia Nagar, a Muslim concentrated space. Some even call it a 'Muslim ghetto' or a 'Muslim area'. But Jamia Nagar (Jamil, 2017) in itself is spatially very distinct and includes many *mohalas*, (Kirmani, 2013) localities and areas. Some of them are graded in terms of class, community and higher real estate values also when it comes to housing parameters. Like, Batla House and Abul Fazal two of the areas within Jamia Nagar where I conducted my fieldwork are in itself very diverse spaces. From slums to gated houses and colonies it's just like any other space in Delhi. Jamia Nagar has seen migration from the city and outside the city likewise. Mostly one will find people from UP and Bihar who have come from outside the city to settle here. Jamia Nagar again is one of the spaces which has a high housing demand for Muslims. The reasons being many, but identity and memories of violence have played a major role in the construction of Jamia as a residential space for Muslims. Within this 'homogenous' space, the diversities one finds replicate the differences across caste, community and class orders and obliterates the homogeneity of the space as a unit. There are narratives where owners refuse housing to people from Western U.P. because of the fear of the 'qabza' or them being 'rude' people. The Bihari identity plays itself very differently than a person belonging to U.P. Then those who belong to Old Delhi have their own linkages and associations with the city. These tropes of identity play differently with their sense of belonging to Jamia Nagar and to the city of Delhi.

The construction of an 'other' becomes a confluence of gender, caste, community and regional associations with one's social, cultural and religious identities thus creating a distinct socio-geographical space which gets marked both on the body and space inhabited by the 'other'. This other is thus distanced as the spaces they inhabit and in a way the process of segregation from the mainstream of the city creates a different dynamic in the living realities of these people. Thus, not only separating them in their day-to-day lives but creating and sustaining prejudices and biases that enters into the logics of housing market also. In this paper, I want to approach it through the study of rental housing in Delhi based on the field research conducted in Munirka and Jamia Nagar.<sup>1</sup>

The huge population that flows into major cities of India gets spread across the city as various factors work out that primarily facilitate housing to these people who travel from other regions into the cities. Rental housing in particular provides an entry into the city for people migrating from other regions into cities. In this paper, I argue how rental housing market is deeply embedded within the social, economic, cultural and community structures. How it plays a role in facilitating and accommodating people not only from other regions but within the city itself. The rental housing can also act as a deterrent towards creating an inclusive, affordable, adaptive and equitable city as it can perpetuate discriminations and act as a catalyst also for various forms of segregations in the city.

In this paper, I will try to chart out various factors, modalities and mechanisms within rental housing market that play a role in settling of the people coming to cities particularly taking a case study of Jamia Nagar and Munirka in Delhi. How people navigate into a city not known to them with respect to how rental market operates in these two sites. Within the larger frame of how rental housing market works in Delhi this paper will try to explore how identity and space plays a role in creating spaces that becomes associated with certain markers of a particular community facilitating both inclusion and exclusion from a space. (Susewind, 2015; Gayer 2012) Thus, how it facilitates or denies coming of certain tenants to that area. It will also explore how the division of a city into various spaces like ghettos, slums, gated colonies and gentrified housing societies impacts the access to housing. Not only affordable housing and housing to all, a dignified and respectable housing is a much needed requirement for a lot of people who can't afford to live without being stigmatized in the cities. But at the same time recognizing the caste, community and religious differences which becomes a larger hindrance not only to housing at a basic level but creates issues and problems at multiples levels which leads to segregation in the cities and discriminations and prejudices in the rental housing. Thus, the discrimination in rental housing is intrinsically related to various biases and prejudices that help in constructing the narratives of othering the other as these biases and prejudices penetrate deep into the logics of housing market also.

Various newspaper reports and studies have pointed to the discrimination and prejudices in rental housing markets faced by Dalits and Muslims in particular. (Thorat, Banerjee, Mishra, & Rizvi, 2015; Datta & Pathania, 2016). The access to rental market is facilitated by various factors. In areas like Jamia Nagar and Munirka social and personal networks plays a major role in facilitating access to the rental spaces. One of the reasons the reliance on social networks is because of the existing biases, prejudices that has become a part of the struggles of looking for a house in a city like Delhi. Thus, personal or social networks play an important role in facilitating access to rental housing. It's very important to understand the nature of rental housing and housing market in order to understand how access is created within different areas of a city. In Munirka, where brokers are predominantly Jats and have prejudices and biases with tenants migrating from Northeast region. But at the same time, they have not been able to stop the inflow of tenants from Northeast region into Munirka.

The paper will further explore how in Munirka brokers facilitate a role in rental housing market. How inspite of various prejudices and biases tenants are able to access rental housing market.

In Jamia Nagar as it's a Muslim concentrated area mostly Muslims who have settled here are particularly from Bihar and UP. The people coming from the villages or towns from these locations will at the first instance talk to those people who they know and have settled there. Majorly the rental housing works on *jaan pehchaan*. The brokers also facilitate the access to the houses in the area but due to the history of the place, the dynamics works out in different ways. The paper will look at different dynamics that facilitate routes of access of rental housing in the area.

This paper will look at the intersection of identity and marginality and try to understand the nature of space and rental housing market to evolve the dynamics of the segregation in the city that operate at multiple-levels.

### **Endnote**

The field research was conducted as part of the research for the Housing Discrimination Project

### **References**

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