

The Wire News India, Latest News, News from India, Politics, External Affairs, Science, Economics, Gender and Culture

thewire.in/gender/between-progress-and-patriarchy-gender-dynamics-in-sonipats-transformation



Max Heights Housing Society in Sonapat. Photo: Ekta Chauhan

I recently met with a car accident. While driving back from my university at around 8:30 pm, I crashed my car into a tree to save it from a speeding truck. The truck driver didn't bother to stop and as he sped away, I was left alone on a deserted narrow road, surrounded by fields on both sides and no streetlight.

The car had suffered heavy damage and was making a loud beeping noise. Several men suddenly appeared on the scene, perhaps to help me out. But being alone surrounded by men, without the protection of my private vehicle, I started to freak out. What if I had escaped one accident, but another was waiting to happen.

I got back in the car, without bothering to assess the damage, rolled up my windows and somehow managed to start the engine and drive away. As I called up my family in tears, they could not understand my emotional outburst. Was I physically harmed? No. Was I worried about the damage? There was insurance. Did I want to file an official complaint against the truck driver? No. It was the anxiety of a young woman surrounded by unknown men on a deserted street and the fear of "what if?". The worst nightmare of every Indian woman.

It was made worse by my location on the outskirts of Sonipat, almost 25 km away from Delhi, where I did not know anyone. Is suspicion then the only way one can interact with strangers on the streets? I went over 6 months of research interviews with residents in the area to find out.

Making of the ‘urban complex’

I work at OP Jindal Global University (JGU), Sonipat as an Assistant Professor. The campus is in a rather interesting location. Surrounded by fields, the private non-profit university is built on farmlands privately acquired from farmers of the surrounding villages. The region has historically been the breadbasket of the country but is now at the cusp of an urban overhaul.

Its location close to the National Capital and road connectivity has made it an integral part of Delhi’s regional expansion beyond its metropolitan confines. The Master plan for 2021 includes the Sonipat-Kundli region as part of the Central National Capital Region (Central NCR). This comes a decade after Sonipat was updated as an “urban agglomeration” in the 2001 census.

Located on the northern fringe of Delhi, the area is being developed as the “Sonipat-Kundli Multifunctional Urban Complex”. The Haryana State government is developing this area as a manufacturing and education hub. It has already executed many projects in Industrial Estates, Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and educational hubs.

Within this complex, the area on Sonipat-Murthal Road have been earmarked for educational institutions. On the right side is the Rajiv Gandhi Education City (comprising several universities such as Ashoka University, World University of Design, SRM University) and on the left side of the highway is JGU.

The universities have bought a new wave of infrastructure projects and investments in the region, making it a hotbed of construction. What is interesting is that it is only farmlands that are required leaving out the residential pockets of the villages.

These settlements continue to exist as rural islands in the midst of expanding urban projects. Deemed to be the “next Gurugram” , the sight of constant construction and signboards of upcoming projects glistening in the afternoon sun surrounded by bright wheat crops is unmissable. But does the arrival of infrastructure mark urbanisation? What makes a city? What happens to the village “abadi (population)” when their land is bought by the government or private players for “development”?

What follows land acquisition?

Current understanding of urban development puts forward a rather simplistic view that equates urban with infrastructure and modernity. Moreover, we tend to view the transformation of rural into urban as a linear process, ignoring the messy social changes that often occur during the process. In the case of villages here (and in most of the country), the villages did not transform into urban settlements, but it was the city that was imposed on them.

The sudden coming of infrastructural and commercial projects not only changed the physical landscape but also people's livelihoods and lifestyles, paving the way for the social and cultural clash. The local population is suddenly in contact with diverse migrants into the area ranging from daily wage laborers to highly skilled professionals employed by the university and students.

This interaction happens in an environment of resentment, anger, and anxiety on both sides. The erstwhile landowning families continue to be socially and politically dominant as land is not only a monetary currency but is tied up with one's status and caste. In neighbouring Delhi, erstwhile landowning families of urban villages continue to at least portray themselves as "Dabangg (brave)", often extending influence over local politics as well.

"Ye kal kay aaye log hai (referring to JGU), yahan kay asli sardar hum hai madam. Hum apne gaon ka mahool kharab nahi hone denagay (These people arrived just yesterday, we are the real leaders here, madam. We will not let the environment of our villages deteriorate) 40-year-old Raghu told me as we talked on the street outside his house in Rathdana.

Ironically, most men in the village resent the changes they once longed for. Ramesh (35), a security guard on the JGU campus, who hails from a village in Jind district of Haryana told me between classes "I will never sell my land. I have seen what has happened here; people get money and spend it on cars, expensive weddings and alcohol. *Kya izzat reh jayegi biradari mein bina zameen kay (What respect will be left in community without land?)*."

The promise of urbanity is more attractive than actual urbanisation, which requires one to relinquish their ties to older orders of caste, baradari and kunba (clan). The new urban immigrants into the area on the other hand view the locals with suspicion as they are seen as rogue and violent, especially the men.

Living here since August 2023, I have primarily come in contact with two groups of women: women from erstwhile landowning families (I call them "local") and professional women employed by the universities (I call them "outsiders"). I view the region and its urban march through the eyes of these women who even though come from very different backgrounds share the same fears and anxieties.

'The tall buildings are not for us'

The area is dominated by *Jat* landlords, one of the major landowning caste of North India. They have also recently risen to social and political dominance as they have successfully converted themselves into a rentier class after the acquisition of their lands.

Jats continue to organise themselves as clans (*gotras*) with strict marital rules. This, along with the sense of *Bhaichara* (brotherhood) and emphasis on *biradari* has meant strict social control, especially for women. Upon talking to Jat women of two villages around JGU, Rathdhana and Jagdishpur, it becomes clear that their daily lives and aspirations continue to be strictly controlled by a patriarchal regime.



Jagdishpur village in Sonipat. Photo: Ekta Chauhan

Sunil Khanna in his paper interestingly titled “Shahri Jat and Dehati Jatni” argues that the effects of urbanisation have been different on men and women. While men from erstwhile rural communities around Delhi could quickly move into non-farm activities, women have not experienced these “benefits” and are left out of both economic and social mobility.

The sudden inflow of money, absence of job opportunities and lack of social mobility among men have also led to a crisis of masculinity, which is then reflected in their attempts to control and retain “village values”.

Lack of paid work for men outside of the home has not meant a retreat to the domestic world which is considered “feminine”. Radhika Govinda argues that men then establish their dominance and showcase their traditional masculine roles through behaviours like eve teasing, bodybuilding, smoking, and gambling in communal areas.

According to Govinda, these behaviors are less about an audience of women and more about the monitoring and affirmation from other dominant males, in a process Michael Kimmel described as “homosocial enactment.”

According to Khanna, in the case of communities such as *Jats*, it is the women who are seen as the sole custodian of the imagined past. Observing *Jat* women in urban villages of Delhi, he argues that these changes have been purely negative. Khanna, in fact, claims that the women have remained ‘rural’ whereas the men have become ‘urban’.

Thus, it is the women who are subjected to extreme surveillance and punishment for transgressions. Sanya, a 36-year-old homemaker in Rathdana pointed out “Men marrying outside the baradari is tolerated. Even encouraged sometimes as it would conquer and add more people to the village. But we can’t even imagine a daughter choosing to marry herself.” Her 16-year-old daughter Manya further adds “while young boys have bikes and cars, none of us have a vehicle. Our elders think that would make us awara, but I only want a cycle to go to school. The local bus is often late”.

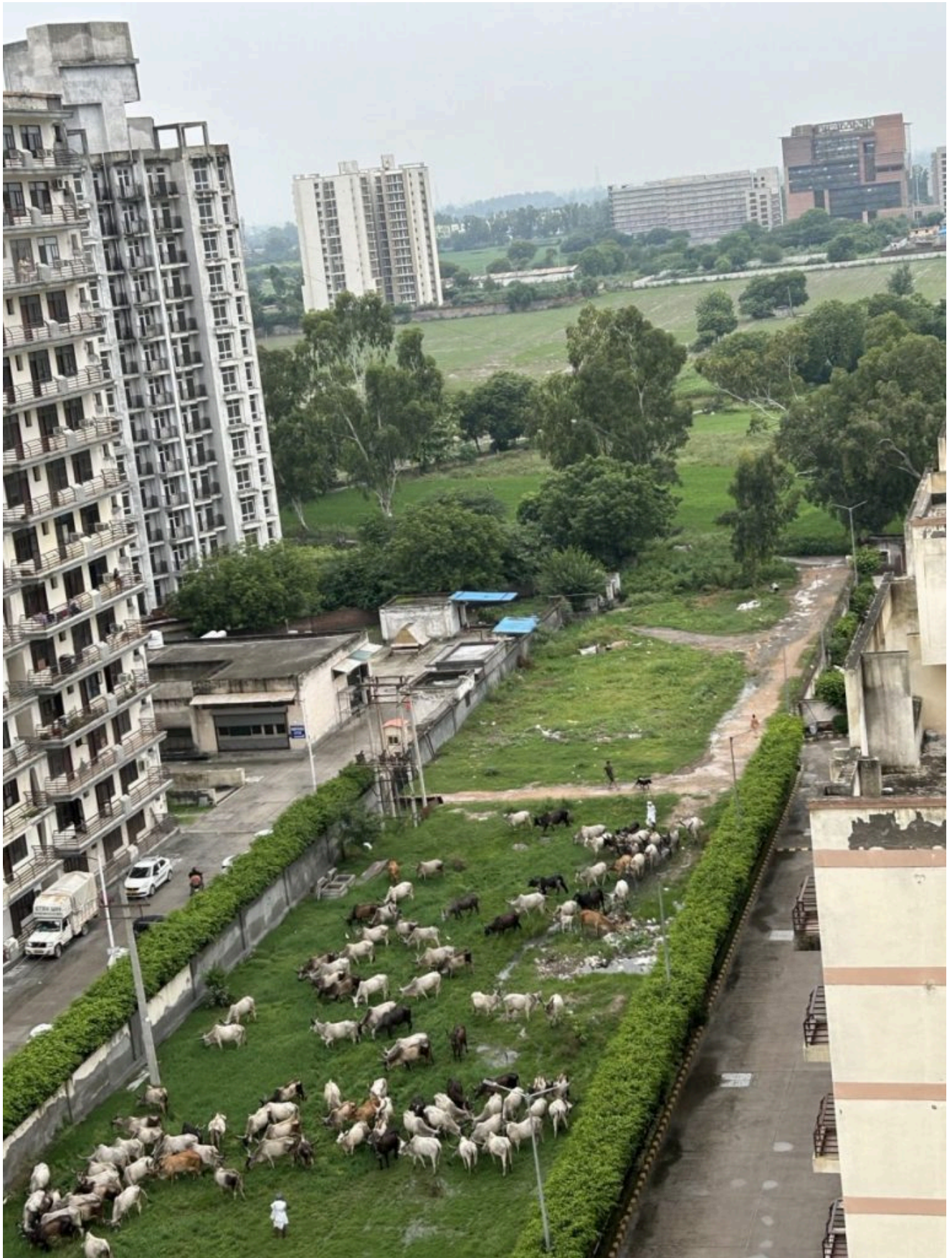
I couldn’t help but notice her eyes wandering to my car parked at the corner of the street. I offered her a ride but she was asked to go inside and help her aunts with household chores. Even though Rathdana and Jagdishpur boast of one the highest compensation received for their lands and extravagant displays of wealth, the dreams of the women of these villages continue to be curtailed.

Navigating Sonipat as a Young Professional

The majority of teaching and non-teaching staff employed by OP Jindal Global University live in gated societies close to the campus. These are rented and allotted to individuals.

Currently, the staff is accommodated in Tulips, Max Heights Phase 1 and 2, supermax and

Jindal Global City. It is these residents especially the women who are often looked upon as “outsiders” bringing corrupt urban values and polluting influence on the local women.



Max Heights. Photo: Ekta Chauhan

Research on the cities of the Global South has shown how urbanisation is an uneven gendered process, often subjecting women to violence, and restricted access to public spaces, decent jobs and access to health and education.

The threat of bodily harm affects not only young women but also those who “transgress” heteronormative boundaries, such as those who, in one form or another, live “independently”. Further, the relative anonymity of some female urban dwellers, who may not be able to get protection from their family and kin networks makes them more vulnerable to attack from strangers and domestic violence.

The situation becomes further precarious in areas such as Sonipat without any safe and reliable public transportation, exposing women to the risk and associated psychological anxiety and fear of moving around.

Deepening divides

The shadows cast by rapid urbanisation near Sonipat are deepened by a palpable undercurrent of fear and mistrust, as new urban aspirations confront enduring rural apprehensions. The dichotomy is further deepened by very limited interaction between different communities, as each of them tries to “protect” themselves from the other. My unfortunate experience of the car accident made me realise how my fear was not just an individual experience but mirrored a collective societal anxiety over identity, space, and security.

Sasha (30), who employs a house help from Rathdana village sums up the somewhat intertwined experiences of women in the area.

“The only local friend I have made in 5 years is my maid. Both of us bond over our shared experiences of patriarchal controls; I am scared of the local men, so is she; even if in a different way. We live in our gated enclaves, drive down to our place of work and order everything online. There is hardly any public space where the two communities can interact,” says Sasha.

Dr Ekta Chauhan is an Assistant Professor at the Jindal School of Art & Architecture (OP Jindal Global University). She researches on themes related to cities, communities and culture. She is currently working on her book documenting the urban villages of Delhi and NCR.

(This article is a part of the author’s ongoing research on gender dynamics in urban peripheries with a focus on Sonipat)

