Urban Aspirations: A Field View from the Margins of the City

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Abstract

Cities in India are transforming rapidly. While there is considerable variation in the level of transformation among the various cities, metropoles like Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai are witnessing the most significant changes as they navigate their way into the exacting networks of the global economy. These transformations are not apolitical in nature, but rather respond to societal imperatives that are compliant with the requirements of the middle class, the class that occupies dominant city spaces. Consequently, urban transformations embody the particular perspectives of the dominant class. The post-economic liberalisation period has seen significant shifts in the way Indian cities are planned and structured. There has been, for instance, a gradual increase in exclusionary city spaces and gated enclaves. Development plans justify these transformations by claiming that they comply broadly and comprehensively with people's aspirations and therefore reflect a homogenous and uncontested imagery of the city. But are these visions really homogenous? Do alternate city visions exist? Do urban transformations actually silence alternate visions and result in suppressed assumptions and a discordant urban culture? If so, what is the nature of this divisiveness? Is it restricted to physical segregation or is it expressed at subtler levels in the urban social fabric? This article is the synthesis of an ethnographic study, undertaken in the rapidly transforming metropolis of Delhi, India, that addresses these questions; it also aims to challenge development plans that project a homogeneous idea of the city that is questionable at best. Moreover, it explores alternate visions, that is to say, visions emanating from below, from the urban poor's desires regarding the spaces around them.

Keywords: urban renewal, urban culture, India

Introduction. Delhi: The Vicissitudes of Growth

With a population of more than 16 million (Chandramouli, 2011) Delhi, the capital of India, is the second most populous city in the country after Mumbai. The city holds a significant position not only from a demographic standpoint, but also because of its ever-increasing political and economic influence in the country. From the colonial period to the present day, Delhi has been a centre for political action, decision-making, and has played a paramount role on the social, political and cultural stages of national life. Beyond these characteristics, the city's identity is that of a multicultural and multilingual conglomerate. Evidently, the constant flow of population into the city is the reason for its diverse socio-cultural character. Delhi recorded a population increase of 23% due to migration between the years 2001 and 2011.[1] Kumar (2013) explains that Delhi's first Human Development Report indicated that Delhi, not Mumbai, is the most sought-after "city of dreams" for the common Indian. Nearly 40% of the population of Delhi is composed of migrants and, on average, 665 people migrate to the capital every day. To give an idea of the reasons why people migrate, the figures show that about 63% of incoming migrants from Bihar and 46% from Uttar Pradesh are characterised as "poor". Employment and livelihood opportunities, therefore, are the major reasons for the influx of people into Delhi.

A conundrum attends the integration of these new populations into the social fabric. On the one hand, they deliver most of the essential services in Delhi, while on the other their habitations are seen as a blot on the image of a "world-class" city. The urban restructuring and transformation practices that took place in Delhi, specifically post-1991,[2] charted the path towards the transformation of Delhi into a "world-class city". In line with regulatory prescriptions, urban renewal practices have endeavored to make city spaces impeccable, well-ordered and opulent. But a direct upshot of these practices has been the "invisiblisation" of the urban poor in the city spaces and their peripheralisation to marginal locations. To throw critical light on these practices, this article focuses on the ethnographic work done in one such settlement located on the peripheries of Delhi, the Bawana Resettlement Colony. This settlement came into existence in the year 2004, right after the demolition of one of Delhi's largest slum clusters, the Yamuna Pushta slums, situated on the banks of the river Yamuna.

Let us begin with inherently essential questions: What is the nature of the imaginative constructs and the aspirations of the people of the Bawana resettlement colony regarding the spaces around them? What do the urban poor envision for these spaces? What is the nature of this imagined space and what is its relation to the contemporary discourses of urban spatial transformations? To answer these questions, the following sections will delve briefly into the history of the emergence of the Bawana Resettlement Colony amidst the "world-class city" discourse. The aim here is to problematise the concept of communal "aspirations" and make the argument that, although aspirations are located in the everyday sphere of public imagination and may appear as a natural phenomenon, a specific research focus on communal aspirations as expressed by actual residents is requisite for understanding cities. Such a focus contests bureaucratic narratives and allows for elaboration on the expressed aspirations and imaginative longings of the people of Bawana regarding their private and public spaces.

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[1] A city with room for migrants, if not a roof over their heads. (2015, February 3). Retrieved from http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/a-city-with-room-for-migrants-if-not-a-roof-over-their-heads/

[2] In 1991, India adopted the New Economic Policy that resulted in the liberalisation of the economy and opened up avenues for more private and foreign investment. This was implemented by adopting structural adjustment programmes like decentralisation, devaluation and disinvestment.

Additionally, it supports analyses that relate and contrast their aspirations to the planning of the city of Delhi as exhibited in the master plans.

Bawana Resettlement Colony: An Aftermath of the World-Class Delhi Idea

Situated on the North-West corner of Delhi towards the Delhi-Haryana border, the Bawana resettlement colony is almost 30 kms. away from the Yamuna Pushta slums. Yamuna Pushta was a cluster of slums located in the eastern part of Delhi, near the banks of the river Yamuna, that housed almost 35,000 working class families and supported a population of 1,500,000. Almost 70% of these families were Muslim.[3] The majority of the people residing in these slums was made up of construction workers, who had been brought to Delhi by labour contractors during the Asian Games in 1992 (Bhan & Menon-Sen, 2008). There was also a substantial population of wage labourers and informal workers like rag-pickers, rickshaw pullers, head-loaders and domestic workers, largely migrated from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.
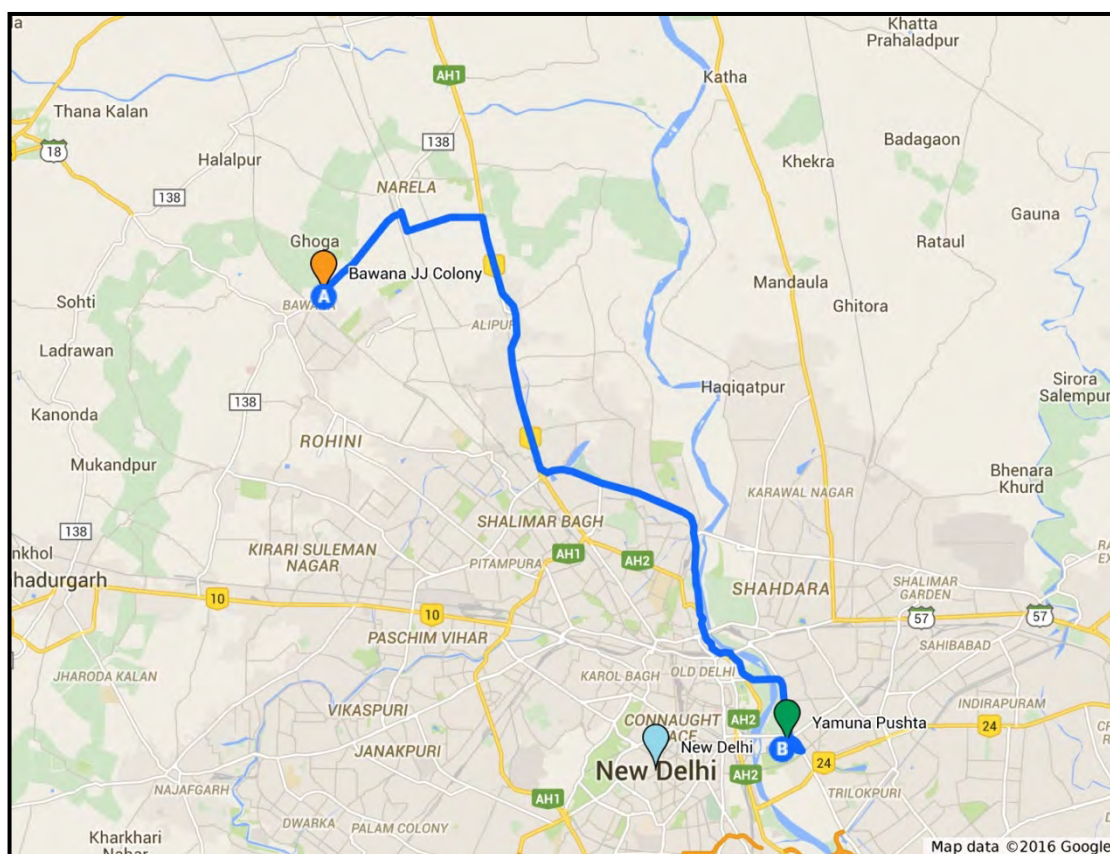

Figure 1: Bawana Resettlement Colony and Yamuna Pushta on the map of Delhi.
Source: Google Maps.

In the year 2004, these slums were demolished. Various reasons were cited for this demolition, such as the illegality of the settlements on the riverbed and the pollution of the river Yamuna. However, fact-finding report by Hazards Centre[4] reported that only 0.08% of

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[3] A religious minority in India.

[4] A non-profit organisation set up in 1997 for the purpose of providing professional services to community and labour organisations. The organisation aims to identify, understand and combat the hazards that beset communities and workers.

the waste going into the Yamuna originated in the slums of Pushta. The fact is that evictions were also motivated by petitions from middle-class groups and Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) to clean up the Yamuna and its surroundings and make the squalid slums imperceptible from the city's neighbourhoods. In addition, the demolition of the Yamuna slum cluster was part of the grandiose plan to convert Delhi into a world-class city. Promoted aggressively by the then Union Minister of Culture and Tourism Jagmohan Malhotra, the demolitions paved the way for the construction of a riverside promenade along the river Yamuna; this promenade was intended to become a major attraction for the tourists that would flock to Delhi for the 2010 Commonwealth Games.

Delhi took its first major step towards becoming "world-class" in 2003. That year the city won the bid to host the Commonwealth Games, a spectacular international event that justified the remodeling and facelift of the city. Hosting the Games required that the city give an impression of elegant modernity, at the very least in appearance and in infrastructure. Dupont (2011) argues that, like the Olympics elsewhere, in Delhi the Commonwealth Games were used by the city's authorities as a "catalyst of urban change" and an "international showcase" to enhance the city's global recognition. The preparation for the games saw significant investments in the "world-class" idea, this in the way of expenditures to improve Delhi infrastructure, boost local jobs and income, develop a world class transportation framework for tourists, expand the Delhi airport through a joint venture with GMR-Fraport, a German firm, refurbish public facilities like bus stops, redesign dustbins, and re-style street lights and other street furniture. Beyond the efforts to upgrade infrastructure, there were numerous attempts to improve public order and enhance urban aesthetics for the games. However, the human cost of this aestheticisation was borne to a large extent by the poor. The Delhi government made all attempts to clear away the poor, as well as other "undesirables" (beggars, homeless, dogs, cows), from the streets of Delhi. As a function of the process of aestheticisation, slum demolitions caused dislocation and significantly altered Delhi's urban fabric.

Although the Commonwealth Games marked the beginning of concrete attempts to transform the city, the idea of the "world-class city" in India, specifically in Delhi, has its inception in the neo-liberal economic reforms and free-market policies that were introduced in 1991. Though the plans aiming to convert Delhi into a world-class city do not provide a concrete definition of what a world-class city actually is, general governance perspectives define such a city as one that attracts greater foreign investments by showing increased potential for economic development and improved standards of living. In the dominant public discourse, it implies a city that offers leisure living, high-end infrastructure, faster mobility, "clean" businesses, a spectacular consumptive landscape, and nodal positioning in the global flow of transnational capital and international tourism (Batra, 2010). Seen through the lens of that definition, slum demolitions and the subsequent resettlement of slum-dwellers at the city margins appropriately served the implicit, but very real goal of creating a spectacular city centre devoid of any traces of dirt or poverty.

Locating Aspirations in the Understanding of Cities

Cities are inherently aspirational in nature. I mean to say by this that cities are the product of the imagination, that of planners, politicians, architects and the dominant class. Using their basal platform, the media, these players perform a future image of the city on the public stage, an image already rendered in the planning documents that play a crucial role in transforming the city. But does this image reflect consensus? Is it uncontested and shared

equally by all of the city's inhabitants? Certainly not. Since the urban fabric is heterogeneous and composed of distinct social identities, it would be a fallacy to assume that city visions are homogenous. This leads us to posit the following three suggestive assumptions; they should provide a clear lens through which to locate dissimilar aspirations while at the same time understanding the dynamism of Indian city spaces.

Firstly, the literature on Indian urban studies has dealt with the question of the construction of the image by focusing largely on middle class perspectives. It has been noted that city planning and redevelopment practices are often aligned with the vision of the middle class. These middle-class-centered city visions have been vehemently censured for being exclusionary and for alienating the urban poor (Fernandes, 2006; Srivastava, 2015; Deshpande, 2003), and yet, in spite of the criticism, parallel visions for the city from the perspective of the urban poor have not been explored.

This might be explained by the fact that the urban poor have been viewed as passive elements, mere recipients of the transformation practices in the city. It is true that their struggles for survival, their difficulties in accessing basic services, their everyday negotiations, their contestations with the state and their claims for rights to the city have been at the centre stage of urban studies. Scholars and researchers (Baviskar, 2003; Bhan, 2009; Dupont, 2008; Ramanathan, 2005) have critically engaged with issues of slum demolitions and associated aspects of illegality, citizenship and the rights of the poor in the city. But, although this has significantly enriched our understanding of the urban issues in the context of the poor, the politics of urban development and the agency of the poor in asserting their rights, there has been limited focus on understanding how the urban poor in fact *envision* their city spaces. Hence, there is a significant need to bring the communal imagination and expectations of the urban poor for the future of their city and its neighbourhood spaces into the existing contours of urban studies.

Secondly, exploring how the poor imagine the future of the urban spaces they inhabit also means acknowledging their world views, their voice and hence their identity within the urban social fabric. Das (2007) argues that capturing their voice and their narratives is not about solving their problems but about acknowledging their voice and their needs. This is one of the ways to understand the most ordinary and everyday life practices of people. Bringing the voices of any particular group into the domains of research, academia, urban planning or policy is an acknowledgement of their identity. Taylor (1994) argues for the moral cognisance of persons who hold worldviews that are different from ours. In a multicultural society, hegemonic representations of the voices of people from different groups, ethnicities, class, caste and gender puts the subaltern at the lowest level and their perspectives are completely neglected. It is not just a matter of negligence and of silencing the voices from below, but is also an attempt to erase people's identities. Taylor argues that misrecognition is a form of oppression and, therefore, giving recognition is not just a courtesy that we owe to people, but also a human need.

Thirdly, the idea of acknowledging different groups' aspirations for the future of their city is closely related to the rights of people to their city. Lefebvre (1996) in his famous text "The Right to the City", argues in favour of diversity in the image of the city and considers these images utopianisms. He argues that there is no single imagination, not one utopia but several utopianisms:

> Who is not a utopia today? Only narrowly specialised practitioners working to order without the slightest critical examination of stipulated norms and constraints, only these not very interesting people escape utopianism. All are utopians, including those futurists and planners who project Paris in the year 2,000 and those engineers who have made Brasilia! But there are several utopianisms. Would not the worst be that utopianism which does not utter its name, covers itself with positivism and on this basis imposes the harshest constraints and the most derisory absence of technicity?" (p. 151)

For Lefebvre, these utopias are prospective, they are alternatives to the present conditions. In other words, they are conceptual possibilites generative of models for future urban planning. The urban poor, on the surface, submit their utopias as alternatives to present-day city planning practices. But this is, as we shall see, a very complicated scenario.

Harvey's concept of the "right to the city", though primarily drawn from Lefebvre, is more contextualised to present conditions and is rooted in neo-liberal formulas. Harvey argues that excessive urbanisation and market-driven agendas have changed cities' physiognomy and have resulted in segregated spaces, gated communities and privatised public spaces that are now subjected to constant surveillance. These conditions have resulted in a threat to urban identity, citizenship and the sense of belonging in urban life. He argues that such processes have impacted the poor and underprivileged significantly as they have been removed for the sake of capitalist production and, moreover, have not been allowed to occupy their rightful place in the city. This can only be combated by democratic control over the process of urbanisation and use of surplus (Harvey, 2012). For Harvey, this "democratic control" lies at the heart of the Right to the City which, according to him, is both a working slogan as well as a political ideal devised to enable the dispossessed to take back control of the city. This ideal, therefore, calls for the purposeful participation of the inhabitants in the discourses of urban planning; the objective is to include them in the decisions that impact the future of the city. This kind of participation reflects the need to focus on the aspirations that people have for the spaces around them.

Aspirations for Housing Space

The aspirations of people from the Bawana resettlement colony are closely connected to the limitations and challenges that they face in accessing their present spaces. Voicing their aspirations also sheds light on the hegemony that the middle class has enjoyed in the visualising of neighbourhood and city spaces. This writer has noted that people's aspirations proceed with a crescive field of reference: progressing from the private spaces of their homes to the public spaces in the neighbourhood and then to larger city spaces.

A stroll through the narrow lanes of the Bawana resettlement colony provides an instructive glimpse into the limited housing space available to the residents. People use the same space for almost all household purposes, as there is no separation for cooking, washing, or living activities. Limited housing space has forced people to construct rooms by stacking them one over another, a situation that has resulted in a slew of weak housing structures.

Figure 2: Vertical rises in housing structures due to limited housing space. Source: Author.

At the time of the abovementioned resettlement, plots in two sizes, 12.5 square meters (sq. mts.) and 18 sq. mts. were allotted to families that could provide proof of residence. The families that were able to provide proof of residence in the slums of Yamuna Pushta before January 1990 (through documentary evidence) were alloted plots of 18 sq. mts. Those having proof of their residence after January 1990 but before 1998 were given plots of 12.5 sq. mts. Evidently, the allotted plots are too small for most of the families, as the average family size in Bawana exceeds five. The small size of the dwelling and the residents' discomfort with them emerged prominently when they were asked about their aspirations for housing space. In almost all interactions with the families, members asserted that the government should reconsider the size of plots allotted. The minimum size of the house to which people aspire in Bawana is between 35 sq. mts. to 45 sq. mts. An old couple living in Bawana with their family of four sons and one granddaughter expressed their concern over the small size of the plot and their expanding family, stating to this writer that:

> It's just not enough. It is so small. What can you do with a 12 sq. mt. plot? This is the place to live, cook and do everything. You can't do any separation here. It's so small.... It is so difficult for all of us to stay here comfortably. I have four sons. To what extent will you keep building one floor over another?

To further aggravate matters, there has been a gradual decrease in the size of plots allotted to evictees during resettlement in Delhi, from 80 sq. mts. – as prescribed in the first Master Plan[5] of Delhi in 1962 – to 12.5/18 sq. mts. at present. However, "a minimum size of resettlement of JJ plot is 25 sq. mts. which may be reduced to 18 sq. mts. *with 100% coverage* provided 7 sq. mts. per plot is clubbed with cluster open space" is prescribed in the

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[5] The Master Plan is a perspective document that envisions the development of a particular city for a period of the upcoming twenty years. Delhi is presently led by the third master plan, *Master Plan 2021*. It was prepared in the year 2007 aiming to achieve stated development goals by 2021. The First Master Plan of Delhi was prepared in 1962 with the target year of 1981; that is, it planned for the development of Delhi until the year 1981. This was followed by the Second Master Plan, which was prepared in 1987 and aimed for the development of Delhi until 2001.

Master Plan 2001 for Delhi. This was further revised with a Masterplan 2021 that recommends relocation on built structures (or flats/houses) of at least 25 sq. mts. in size (DDA, 2010). Nevertheless, in the Bawana resettlement colony, in spite of the fact that 100% coverage could not be achieved, the size of plots was 18 sq. mts. and 12.5 sq. mts. only.

Living on such a small piece of land has led to the substantial deterioration of the quality of life. A survey conducted by Bhan and Menon-Sen (2008) during the initial days of resettlement reported that 56% of households (1,451 families) lived in 12.5 sq. mt. plots while 44 % lived in 18 sq. mt. plots, i.e. 1,126 families. For an average household size of 5.35, this housing space implies that 5 people share a space of 10.12 feet, roughly the size of the kitchen in a middle class apartment and about one-third the size of an average-size plot in informal settlements like Yamuna Pushta (estimated to be about 33 sq. mts.). A constant desire for an increase in living space, therefore, appears significantly in the residents' narratives.

Aspirations for Neighbourhood Spaces

People's imaginaries are associated with the physical form, structure, and appearance of neighbourhood places as well as social values like safety and spaces free from discrimination and crime. People's dreams for public spaces and neighbourhood spaces include material as well as non-material elements. The material elements are related to the concrete appearance of spaces, the way they are maintained, the role of people as well as administrative bodies in maintaining these spaces, basic hygiene conditions, and the structures of these places. All of these elements influence people's access to public places.

The non-material elements of public spaces are more complex than their material counterparts. Non-materiality pertains to differential claims of people over the use of space. 'Who uses which space' is a pertinent question within the context of the use of public spaces. For instance, it is usually seen that women and girls desist using public spaces if there is the dominance of men or if women perceive a threat to their safety in these spaces. This results in a limited access by women to public spaces. Also, the instances of harassment, violence, and crime in public spaces determine people's accessibility to them. These non-material elements can be more significant to people than the physical availability and appearance of public spaces.

Regarding neighbourhood spaces, the first material element that appears in people's narratives is related to community infrastructure and basic services. Non-availability of cemented roads and streets make people question the administration for the work that has been done in the last ten years of resettlement. Apart from roads and streets, community toilet complexes (CTCs) are significant neighbourhood spaces. Due to limited housing space and the absence of toilets inside houses, these CTCs are an essential service resource for the community. They have not, however, been properly maintained, and this has resulted in issues related to sanitation and basic hygiene.

The lack of maintenance of these CTCs has a direct impact on the mobility of women and girls in the colony. The majority of dysfunctional CTCs have become waste dumping zones or dark corners used for drug abuse. This has serious repercussions on the safety of women and girls, and sexual harassment around the CTCs is a common occurrence. The exigency of open defecation further makes girls and women more vulnerable to sexual abuse. This restricts their mobility significantly in the public spaces.

The non-availability of services and the limitations related to basic community infrastructure give evidence of the consistent neglect and apathy shown for resettlement sites by municipal authorities. Unfortunately, this neglect is nothing new. There has been unvarying disregard for developing quality infrastructure in resettlement sites[6]. In a study conducted by Sheikh & Mandelkern (2014), government officials from the Delhi Development Authority (DDA),[7] there is the expressed understanding that "in the planner's vision, there has been neglect of economically weaker sections within planning". The planning documents have been disparaged for providing a superficial analysis of the problems of the urban poor and resettlement site residents, as well as for being silent on the unavailability of basic services like water, sanitation, health and education facilities at resettlement sites. It has been noted, in studies like that of M.C. Saglio-Yatzmirsky (2014), that plan documents have failed to provide any comprehensive strategy for developing basic services at resettlement sites, and that "[t]he poorest families, who do not have the means necessary to adjust to these new constraints, often end up reselling – or, more preceisely, giving up their right to a plot for immediate monetary gain" (p. 337).

The above discussion certainly indicates that physical community infrastructure is fundamental in the idiopathic image that people contrive for the places they wish to inhabit. Naturally, this image is intimately linked to the limitations that people face in everyday life.

In addition to basic community infrastructure, open spaces like parks, gardens and spaces for leisure and entertainment within the colony are some of the expressed desires that transcend the limits of fundamental necessities. While these spaces might not be essential for survival, they certainly have a role to play in improving the quality of life for colony residents. Interestingly, such spaces appear more strongly in the narratives of adolescent boys and girls. These spaces traditionally provide young adults with an avenue for exercising personal freedoms and a space for intimacy. Through such aspirations, they demand non-discriminatory spaces where they can interact freely with each other without being judged or labelled stereotypically. Both boys and girls face a restricted and conservative social environment where their intimate relations and communication are curbed. This influences their aspirations for spaces of leisure, recreation and entertainment. Such things might not appear to be basic or essential, but they have a real potential to enhance the quality of their lives by providing youngsters with a degree of freedom from peremptory environments.

Field narratives on people's attitude regarding space reflect on the social character of space, relations that people have within the spaces around them and the way they relate to the spaces themselves. Lefebvre (1974) in *The Production of Space* argues that space is social, that is to say, it is socially produced and is rooted in the relations of production. According to him, social space is the outcome of a variegated set of circumstances and cannot be reduced to the category of an object. As such, space is consistently shaped by human activity. Massey (2009), drawing from Lefebvre, argued that space is a product of relations and is a complex of networks, links, exchanges and connections that springs from the intimate level of our daily lives. She considers spatial relations within the home as well as in the outdoors

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[6] Studies conducted in other resettlement sites in Delhi like *Bhalswa, Narela, Madanpur-Khadar* have shown similar findings.

[7] The DDA is an institutionalised body formed under the Delhi Development Act, 1957. It is a powerful body which owns almost a quarter of Delhi's land and is involved in almost all the activities related to land, housing and infrastructure in the city. The major functional areas of the DDA are planning, housing, land disposal, land management, horticulture, architecture, sports, landscape and urban heritage. Thus, it incorporates almost all of the aspects directly or indirectly related to the development and planning of urban areas.

environment as significant in the production of space. Space is produced by the establishment as well as by the refusal of relations. Social relations are central to space and determine the way individuals conceive space, so the dependency between social relations and the space they produce is reciprocal. While the nature of space decides the types of social relations that are developed, social relations, in turn, influence the production of space. Field narratives exemplify this relationship and demonstrate that the nature of neighbourhood and public spaces has a significant impact on the formation of people's social relationships.

People in the Bawana colony make an immediate comparison between the memories that they attach to their abodes before resettlement (the slums near the Yamuna) and their present resettlement site. The space of the Yamuna Pushta furthered the establishment of social relations through a safe, secure and familiar environment, a type of space that Bawana failed to provide. Everyday violence and criminality due to excessive alcoholism and drug abuse among men make the public spaces of the Bawana colony unsafe. The unsafe environment and the limited availability of collective spaces results in restricted social relations. The inhibition of social relations has alienated people from the public spaces and, consequently, has prevented any type of attachment to them. The narratives from Bawana, therefore, explain that space produces as well as is produced by social relations. And these social relations determine the way people associate with space.

Aspirations for City Spaces

For people, city spaces beyond their own habitation are impersonal and are viewed in light of the struggles that they have to face in the city. The aspirations for the city are not as precisely defined as they are for their spaces of habitation or for neighbourhood spaces. They assess the city spaces in connection with the spaces that they have inhabited.

The changes that have taken place around Yamuna Pushta after the demolition of their houses appear prominently in their narratives about the city. In interactions regarding the city, people constantly relate to the space where they used to live and reflect on the changes that have taken place there. The dominant discourses that describe the transformations of the city into aesthetically appealing spaces through structures like flyovers, malls and high-rise buildings appear clearly in the poor's assessment of the changes that have taken place at Yamuna Pushta. Although, and due to their peripheral location and limited means to connect back to the city, people find themselves disconnected to these beautiful places and to the city of Delhi as a whole, for them, these refurbished spaces are still evocative of the way city spaces should appear.

Therefore, for the people of the Bawana colony, the spaces of the middle class and upper-class societies are the benchmark for them in terms of the desired physical structure of city spaces. The dominant discourse on city spaces, then, still provides them with the particular idiom for categorizing spatial configurations. One of the female residents of the community stated to this writer that:

> There are no such parks or places where we can go and sit. All the parks that you will see around are in bad shape. People cannot go anywhere to relax... When I go towards Rohini[8] I see such nice parks where people just sit and chat. Children play there. There

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[8] Rohini is a residential area near Bawana colony comprising many gated enclaves whose residents are mainly middle and upper-middle class.

are chairs, trees, green grass and those places look so beautiful. We also want such spaces around our homes so that we can also sit and relax for some time and our children can also play. We can also hold some function or ceremony there if we want to. Right now there is no such place around. Whatever empty places are, they are dumped with garbage all over. They stink every time and are of no use. The government should do something to clean them.

However, in terms of the social environment, people express their aspirations in relation to their own experiences and struggles. For the poor, liveability in the city is crucial. Not only livability in terms of affordability but in terms of access to jobs: for them, employment is of crucial concern if their life in the city is to reach tolerable levels.

It should be stressed that these people's aspirations resonate with middle class values. Their aspirations mirror the middle class discourse of beautiful, ordered, segregated and pure city spaces and neighbourhood spaces. The conception of the "urban" is, therefore, constricted and is limited to the dominant idea of cities as aesthetically pleasing spaces with access to luxury infrastructure. This discourse demonstrates that a "fixed" idea of the "city" is formed in the dominant discourse and becomes entrenched amongst its inhabitants, shaping their desires. It further reveals that there is no radical re-imagination of the city spaces among poor residents, as their aspirations to re-order and re-structure the spaces are framed within the dominant discourse.

Conclusion

Understanding how a city is imagined and appreciating its transformations from the perspective of the poor inverts the vision that traditionally has been projected for the city. It provides an alternative vision for the city, a vision from below. These visions contest the homogenous conception of the city and show an alternative vision that emerges from the poor. Interestingly, the idiom used by the poor to express these visions do not radically re-imagine city spaces, but to a certain extent reproduce existing dominant narratives of ordered and aesthetically appealing spaces. But for the poor, intimate aspirations for spaces emerge from everyday interchanges and essential exigencies, as their ambitions are not of a strictly aesthetic character but rather are embedded deeply in their struggles for equal rights, access and entitlements in the city. For the poor, urban transformations go beyond creative or artistic considerations and are a part of the real world of struggle and distress. Beyond dreams of an aesthetically pleasing city, the poor's aspirations, as they are based on more pragmatic considerations, have a real potential to alter the quality of life for the better. They constitute utopias that are not seen as unreachable, utopias that are rooted in real life. Their everyday struggles are undertaken, in large measure, to make these utopias a reality. As Lefebvre states, utopias are alternatives that are imagined for the community, visions for tomorrow. As utopias, they might appear evanescent today, but for the poorer classes they are imagined as real possibilities for a more desirable future.

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