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Contested Spaces, Political Practices, and Hindutva: Spatial Upheaval and Authoritarian Populism in Noida, India

Ritanjan Das, Nilotpai Kumar, and Praveen Priyadarshi¹

Abstract

Contemporary India is showing increasing signs of 'competitive' authoritarian populism (Levitsky and Way, 2010). The mainstream political discourse in the country is dominated by the sectarian religious forces of Hindu nationalism or Hindutva, serving as the agency of a development narrative that promises to return India to its 'greatness of yore'. In this paper, we examine the case of Noida, an upcoming satellite township adjacent to the capital New Delhi, to describe a process of spatial upheaval that is leading to continuous practices of 'othering'. These processes are enabling the Hindutva forces to take root locally. In effect, we argue that local space-making has an intrinsic relationship with authoritarian populism, and it therefore needs to be at the analytical forefront.

Keywords: spatial upheaval, relative and relational space, Hindutva, authoritarian populism, Noida

¹ The author listing is random, signifying equivalent contributions from all authors.

1 Introduction

Two correlated dynamics characterise contemporary development politics in India. First, the transition to capitalism is more entrenched today than it has ever been since independence (Harriss-White and Heyer, 2015:4). Continually newer, more efficient modes of resource capitalism – or, the ‘extraction of value from nature’ at minimal costs (Woods, 2011:53) – are accompanying high economic growth. The accumulation of capital through dispossession of rural lands, forests, and other raw materials has been noted in particular (e.g. Levien, 2012; Goldman, 2011; Gooptu, 2011, etc.). Capital accrued from resource extraction appears to have favoured corporate businesses, industrial or real estate, with ‘city making’ emerging as a key avenue for profitable investments (Levien, 2012; Harriss-White and Heyer, 2015:10-11). Social differentiation and precarity has also intensified correspondingly. Dispossessions have contributed to the rise of vulnerable, disenfranchised, casual labour on a significant scale. Swelled ranks of ‘footloose labour’ employed in low-wages casual jobs are unmistakable across rural and urban areas today (Breman, 2007; Guerin *et al*, 2015).

Second, even as capital accumulation is apace and social inequalities pronounced, the Indian polity has lurched decisively towards right-wing populism. The Indian political right has a long history. But ever since the BJP (*Bharatiya Janata Party*) led NDA (National Democratic Alliance) came to power in 2014, the country has seen a steady rise in intolerance along religious, ethnic and caste lines.² With its roots steeped into the RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*) – the Hindu nationalist parent organisation of the BJP – the government under Prime Minister *Narendra Modi* is under increasing scrutiny for turning a blind eye towards ‘India becoming more openly, and indeed violently, intolerant - especially towards the Muslim minority, towards atheists and indeed anyone else that the Hindu right takes issue with’ (BBC, 2015)³. The streaks of authoritarian populism in the country are becoming increasingly obvious. Hardly a week goes by without fresh reports of violence perpetrated on religious and ethnic minorities, often supported by a vitriolic political discourse from the RSS and other right-wing organisations. Some researchers also suggest that a sizeable section of India’s affluent middle classes share some strands of right-wing conservatism in their everyday political existence (e.g. Fernandes, 2006).

This paper is not directly concerned with processes of capitalist accumulation through dispossession of land. But it explores if and how the dynamic of authoritarian populism relates to concrete spaces – as already produced through the process of accumulation – from the grounded vantage of *Noida*, a city in the state of Uttar Pradesh, adjacent to New Delhi and part of the National Capital Region (NCR)⁴. We make use of a recent episode of a local skirmish in Noida as a window to scrutinise the manner of formation of a set of practices that explicitly exclude ‘outsiders’, i.e. religious, regional or ethnic minorities. Through this case, we argue that (a) the bureaucratic processes of conceptualisation and production of urban spaces for exclusive middle class consumption facilitate authoritarian populism at the ground, and (b) that, in turn, affluent middle classes and dispossessed peasants both rework authoritarian populism to command spatial control, especially when contested. In more general terms, we argue for a spatially grounded understanding of the local trajectories and varieties of authoritarian populism.

Methodologically, the paper is based on a six months long ethnography in Noida, alongside a significant amount of archival research⁵. The story presented below emerges out of around 50

² See, for example: ‘India’s turn toward intolerance’ (NY Times editorial, 17th July 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/17/opinion/indias-turn-toward-intolerance.html>); ‘A week of worrying about rising intolerance in India’ (BBC Trending, 17th Oct 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-34553015>); and ‘US concerned about ‘rising intolerance, violence’ in India’ (The Hindu, 30th July 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/US-concerned-about-%E2%80%98rising-intolerance-violence%E2%80%99-in-India/article14517044.ece>).

³ BBC Trending, op.cit.

⁴ A planned region encompassing Delhi and several districts of the adjoining states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

⁵ This is a part of a larger project looking at the relationship between the nature of space and everyday politics in India

interviews conducted with bureaucrats, politicians, BJP/RSS functionaries, security firms, urban dwellers, villagers, migrant labourers, and domestic helps, demonstrating the complex and contested forms of spatial control imbued with authoritarian tendencies.

The paper is organised as follows: the next section briefly describes our ‘window’- the infamous *Mahagun* episode. The following section lays down our theoretical structure, borrowing primarily from Pierre Bourdieu and David Harvey. Section four presents the first half of our narrative- spatial upheaval in Noida and the production of competing social spaces (or nodes). Section five presents a detailed examination of the spatial practices in each node, and the concomitant production of authoritarian populism. The concluding section summaries our core argument about the role of space as an enabler of certain kinds of political dynamics.

2 The *Mahagun* Event: Making of an Authoritarian Populist Narrative

In mid-July 2017, a local skirmish in Noida suddenly hit the national and even international headlines. The following is a brief outline of the events.

On the morning of 12th July, a crowd - comprising mostly of migrant labourers and domestic helps - gathered at the entrance of a posh, gated housing enclave *Mahagun Moderne*, claiming that a housemaid named *Johra* has been missing since the previous night and was possibly being forcefully detained by her employers. The crowd demanded entry and a search of the premises and her employers’ flat. A tussle ensued with the security guards, with the crowd soon forcing into the complex and resorting to stone pelting. A search of the *Sethi’s* (*Johra’s* employers) flat remained unfruitful, but she was soon found elsewhere inside the complex. Following the incident, four first information reports (FIRs) were filed with the local police, three against the crowd, and one against the *Sethis*. The three FIRS charged the crowd that included *Johra’s* husband with rioting, forceful entry, destruction of property, and even attempt to murder. The employers were accused of illegal confinement and violence against the domestic help. The police subsequently arrested 13 people allegedly part of the crowd.⁶

Naturally, the event created quite a stir in Noida, with several conflicting versions afloat. However, it was hardly a news worthy of national and international attention. Nevertheless, the kind of meanings that were subsequently imputed to it, did track widespread attention. The dominant account, produced by the upper-middle class inhabitants of Noida, became a nationalist and exclusivist narrative, using the religious and regional identities of the domestic workers. The narrative started to play out first in social media, as video clips of the commotion were shared across online platforms by *Mahagun* residents, unanimous in their shock and outrage at the audacity of the act of breach of their security. A small write up attributed to the *Sethis* - describing their ordeal and ‘terror’ - was also shared by hundreds of residents. There are two important highlights to this account that was aimed at claiming the position of the aggrieved. The tone is set in the first sentence itself.

Yesterday, our Bangladeshi maid was asked if she has stolen money as we had intuitions that she was doing that.⁷

This invocation of the identity of a ‘Bangladeshi’ and the accusation of stealing (based on ‘intuitions’) were the two presuppositions on the basis of which a subsequent narrative of ‘Indian urban middle class under siege’ came to be constructed. Through rapid shares and retweets of this post, the Bangladeshi identity got firmly assigned with the maid⁸, leading to two conclusions. One, she had to

⁶ See John, Topo, and Monchari (2017) for a detailed account.

⁷ Source: <https://www.facebook.com/jshubh/posts/10155995219010656>

⁸ This was possible because: a) she was a Muslim, and b) she spoke Bengali, the language of Bangladesh, but also that of the state of West Bengal from where she hails. Most of the domestic maids in the area are Bengali speaking Muslims from West Bengal, a distinction conveniently overlooked in the Hindi speaking heartland of India.

be an illegal immigrant (illegal immigration from Bangladesh already occupies an important place in the Hindu nationalist discourse). Two, the crowd that gathered outside *Mahagun*, could not have been a crowd of housemaids and labourers, but a crowd of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. Housemaids and construction workers are supposed to be respectfully docile and habitually subservient. They report to their daily work individually, not as a collective. They come bearing their identity cards, and not stones and sticks. To form a collective, to demand and force entry is an act alien for housemaids. This alien behaviour thus had to be the behaviour of illegal, alien Bangladeshis. A post in a WhatsApp group of these housing society residents read:

But see the audacity of these people...theft and then vandalizing the property. They can even torch the building, and then what will happen? This is grave. This is not as simple as it looks and is much deeper. This is terrifying. This tells me don't ever hire a Bangladeshi maid.

The next turn in the narrative was to posit it as an attack by illegal Bangladeshi (Muslim) immigrants on nationalist (Hindu) Indians. A local RSS functionary shared the *Sethis'* write up on his Facebook page with the following introduction:

Mob of Bangladeshis riot at Mahagun Moderne...You employ them, they will steal, if you question, they will bring mob and riot. If you earn well, live in a decent society, are secular and think that they won't harm you...then you are living in an imaginary world.⁹

With the identity of the crowd metamorphosed from their secular identities of housemaids and construction workers to ethno-nationalistic identities of Bangladeshis and Muslims, the stage was set for politicians to get involved. Mahesh Sharma, the local MP (a long time RSS functionary and a cabinet minister in the central government) visited *Mahagun* soon after the incident, and said:

It is our need and compulsion [to hire the workers]...But even though we know *who they are*, we turn a blind eye, because of our needs (emphasis added).¹⁰

Thus the narrative became firmly embedded in ethnic and nationalistic identities, based on the notions of majoritarian victimhood, illegal immigration, communal overtones, all collapsed within the broad brush description of 'threat to security': a classic demonstration of authoritarian populist trends taking shape on the ground. The administrative and police actions were also guided by this narrative. Alongside the FIRs and arrests, the city administration demolished small makeshift shops and shanties in the area. Fearing more arrests, majority of the people fled from the small slum cluster where *Johra* lived. Ten days after the incident, investigations into the FIR filed by her husband were closed.

Our argument in this paper, however, is that in the construction of such narratives, spatial connotations play a crucial role, but are rarely given the attention they deserve. Even if one adopts a class-conflict lens¹¹, a crucial shortcoming remains in the implicit assumption that incidents such as *Mahagun* can happen anywhere in the country, but in reality they do not. We therefore argue that it is important to explore the spatial specificities of an area and their relationship with the local political discourse, and investigate if *space functions as an enabler* in the production of the ethno-religious, nationalistic discourses. In the next section, we flesh out the theoretical contours of this argument.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dey, A. (2017). 'In the class conflict unfolding in Noida, Union Minister makes it clear he stands with flat owners', *Scroll.in*, 18th July. <https://scroll.in/article/844166/in-the-class-conflict-unfolding-in-noida-union-minister-makes-it-clear-he-stands-with-flat-owners>

¹¹ Which is the perspective offered by a section of the national (newspapers such as Hindustan Times, Hindu, Indian Express, etc.) and international (The Washington Post and NY Times) media.

3 Spatial Upheaval and Authoritarian Populism in Contemporary India

In geography, spatiality implies an independent physical entity containing human activities at multiples scales (Smith 2010:93). Contemporary radical geography however views space in terms of physical spaces that have been shaped through historical social processes (ibid.:105-107). The ‘social production of physical spaces’ is a common conception in pioneering works including those of Neil Smith (2010), David Harvey (1992, 2006) and Doreen Massey (1994).

Harvey, particularly, elaborated the concept of production of space by theorising on *relative space*. While acknowledging the idea of an absolute space, he views space at proximate levels to comprise of relationships amongst material entities in time (Harvey, 2006:4). Such spatiotemporal relationships are multi-dimensional (e.g., ecological/economic), variable (i.e., they are perspective-oriented and depend on flows or friction between entities), objective (rule structured) and somewhat measurable (e.g. labour or capital migration across cities). Harvey has illuminated the nature of contemporary flows (viz., capital) that interrelate vast spaces under neoliberalism and has suggested that the unevenness of urban and rural forms is being exacerbated in the process (e.g. Harvey, 1992). His concept of ‘Accumulation/devaluation by dispossession’ for instance suggests that over-accumulated capitals continuously appropriate new territories and resources through coercion and temptations (2006:93). Araghi (2010) has employed this concept to describe the contemporary restructuring of ‘rural’ by extracting land from peasants to create ‘urban infrastructure’ (also Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2010). Our study of Noida bears evidence to the production of such relativities at micro level. It illustrates how the emerging ‘urbans’ in India are often a ‘spatial hybrid’ that are configured through extraction of farmlands and labour towards real-estate capitals, facilitated by the state whence it goes to affluent middle classes as the new consumers of space. These consumers thereafter seek to command their neighbourhoods through a set of spatially grounded practices that create and maintain ‘new barriers’ on social flows in and through them.

A significant variant of this relative space for Harvey is the *relational space*. It is a space that is forged through subjective representations that frame absolute or relative entities in specific ways. In other words, relational space for Harvey is the space of social experiences and judgments that are shaped by absolute or relative features of a particular space. Through this conception of space he takes up the questions of (contested) meanings of particular spaces and the social identities that they enable to be formed. It is the space of lived everyday life, of cultural symbols and aesthetic senses. We make use of this frame of relational space to understand how the three social groups in Noida - the villagers, the affluent middle classes and the migrant labourers – inhabiting three different spatial nodes, aesthetically experience their cohabitation and represent it to one-another (but of course not reducing the argument *only* to the local material realities and powers).

If the broad thrust of these discussions is that natural spaces have been reproduced through rounds of colonisation and commoditisation, it is also commonly argued that *places*, that is, specific territories of structured social inter-relations and related identities, have witnessed tremendous upheaval in the process (Massey, 1994; Harvey, 2009). Social interrelations now stretch beyond specific localities and they bring new ‘outsides’ in, leading to a series of new practices and struggles at stabilising socio-temporal boundaries and their meanings. Harvey, in his *Conditions of Postmodernity*, has conceptualised such cultural politics of places as the *aestheticisation of politics* (1992:207-10). The phrase refers to the ways in which local, regional or national spaces have often been imbued with new moral and mythical dimensions that draw from pre-modern values or ethnic roots. In a more guarded vein, Massey has noted that both ‘new nationalisms’ and ‘exclusive inner city enclaves’ of the middle class professionals represent related attempts that address the new ‘spatial upheavals’ of the post-Fordist era (1994:162). She observes that such contests are significant for the sort of rival ‘labels/identity/boundaries’ that they try to impose on specific places, and also for the ‘nature of this debate itself’ (ibid.: 5). We draw on this insight that the unrelenting commodification of space and new social dispossessions it entails renews attempts at ‘group/community making’ through imputations of varying, even antagonistic, moral dimensions to the control of spaces. But we do not presume that places and localities have been self-contained up until neo-liberal globalisation prized them apart. As

Harvey himself suggests, *aestheticisation of space* has historically been a cultural response to untrammelled modernisation (1992:209). It is also not clear if the contemporary forms of 'exclusive localism' involve an entirely new set of class practices or intentions.

These reservations bring us to the ways in which sociologists and anthropologists have engaged with place-making under contemporary capitalism, with analytical and methodological tools that focus on everyday social relationships, practices and imaginations. We find a critical application of Pierre Bourdieu's work relevant for our purpose. Bourdieu's varied works argue in favour of a theory of practice that avoids the dichotomies of structuralism and subjectivism. *Practice* for him is a mix of human activities in everyday life. It consists of *works of representation* (i.e. how do social agents *construct* a view of the social world and their own position in this world given their internalisation of the objective rules and norms of 'social space': 1985:727). On the other hand, works of representation necessarily involve the work of interactive, practical, imposition of particular world views in a social space with multiple and temporally shaped perspectives (ibid.:730). Practices are therefore neither completely determined by objective social rules or unequal properties of agents, nor are they driven by autonomous subjective motives and desires (ibid.:726). Rather, social practices emanate from the operation of 'habitus', or the embodied schemes of perception, rules, and properties in individuals, giving them 'durable dispositions' for actions of one sort than other.

The constitution of habitus is linked with the question of how social power and properties – or 'capitals' – are distributed within and across individual habitus in a social universe. Bourdieu has distinguished four main forms of capital: economic (material wealth), social (membership of durable social networks and contacts), cultural (credentials accruing from education, also command of objective cultural products like the arts), and symbolic (when all other capitals are perceived and duly recognised as 'legitimate distinction' (ibid.:724-731). He further argues that these capitals confer specific strengths to individuals within delimited 'fields' – 'economic', or 'cultural' or 'symbolic' – in which one's economic capital may shape one's command of other capitals. He thus seemingly suggests that agents commanding similar volumes and forms of capitals are likely to share dispositions and interests as a group or 'classes', and different classes are likely to produce dissimilar practices and stances.

We specify our theoretical framework by underscoring overlapping conceptual threads from Bourdieu's insights on social space, the radical geographical positions on the neo-liberal reconfigurations of space-time, and attendant insights from critical agrarian studies. The new 'urban' of Noida presupposes and contains the rurals of both local '*former* peasants' and long-distance migrant labour (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a:180). Redundant to the accumulative needs of private or public capital, having already been dispossessed of their farmlands (but not homesteads), the dominant dimension of the 'agrarian question' for the local former peasants is substantially 'political'. They attempt to mobilise their political agency by forging internal alliances and by articulating it through non-electoral political groups (see Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010b: 267). 'Footloose' labourers migrating into Noida possibly represents, on the other hand, the 'systematic crisis' of Indian agriculture that cannot sustain livelihoods of rural smallholders and landless labourers. Reflections by Lefebvre, Harvey, and Massey on space are useful here. Noida's emergence as an urban space since 1976 marks two qualitatively different moments of bureaucratic conceptualisation of space; first of creating an industrial suburb next to Delhi under the 'statist developmental regime' which, under neo-liberal reforms, gives way to land transfers to private capital for housing apartments to affluent middle class consumers. We cannot hope to understand the authoritarian content of the local politics without understanding the organisation of relative spaces in Noida.

The everyday practices and politics of former peasants, migrant labourers, and the affluent middle class enclaves, can be further illuminated using Bourdieusian concepts. For Bourdieu, social space is a multidimensional field in which agents endowed with differential capitals are engaged in a struggle to perceive, maximise and legitimise their advantages. The 'logic of difference' is at the centre of his model, i.e. material and symbolic differences are intentionally pursued and represented by social agents in the form of 'life-styles' that continuously attempt to maintain social separations and shut out the risk

of ‘misalliances’ (1985:730). His more recent empirical works (e.g. *The Weight of the World*, 1999) introduce the functions of the neo-liberal state into this analytical apparatus to show that while urban bourgeoisie is immensely supported in its practices of life-style distinctions by the state, co-habiting social groups endowed with low economic and cultural capitals struggle to reproduce themselves economically, let alone move upwards. The affluent middle class residents of Noida consume elaborately aestheticised life-style in their new enclaves, for which eliminating the risk of social and cultural misalliances with co-resident former peasants and migrant labour is crucial. Sitting across from them, the ghettoised villages of former peasants use their traditional solidarities to attempt gaining a more fair deal from the state for the land they lost. They also lease out lands to immigrant rural labourers from which the posh middle class enclaves recruit their domestic helps. This place is thus a ‘difficult spot’ in which co-habiting social groups possessing divergent dispositions and world-views are forced to confront each other on every day basis. This difficult relative and relational space, we argue, gives rise to a peculiar politics of aestheticisation on the part of affluent enclaves as well as former peasants. The affluent middle classes aestheticise their enclaves as the ‘home-space’ of meritocratic super-achievers, morally entitled to their distinct lifestyles; the former peasants appeal to their rural past, ‘rootedness’ and to durable social solidarities.

The affluent middle classes also strategically employ the right-wing populism of *Hindutva* to ‘incorporate’ themselves into the Indian state (Scoones, Edelman, *et al.* 2017:2). *Hindutva* is the ideology that believes in majoritarian Hindu nationalism for India (Desai, 2008a). It is institutionalised in a slew of organisations known as the *Sangh Parivar* of which the RSS and the BJP are prime constituents. Although *Hindutva* is rooted in the 19th century colonial social policies and processes, the BJP successfully reinvented it since the 1980s by framing a discourse of Hindu victimhood and Muslim appeasement around the post-colonial polity. The most spectacular rise of the BJP and of Hindu Nationalism has however been since 2014. In the persona of Narendra Modi it has found a ‘strong Hindu leader’, aggressively promoting the old *Hindutva* narrative through the new capillaries of electronic social media. He has been helped in his ‘e-populism’ by the rise of a substantial section of new and old urban middle classes who have benefitted from neo-liberal reforms and now zealously support him on social media platforms (Jaffrelot 2013; 2015a). Put differently, contemporary *Hindutva* depends less on grand mobilisations and more on banal socio-cultural practices (Nanda, 2009). Noida illustrates some of these processes, as the affluent middle class neighbourhoods integrate the themes of Hindu victimhood with middle-class victimhood, and harnesses the local state to secure their ‘home-places’ against an imagined other.

Before we can examine how this process plays out in detail, we need to describe the spatial upheaval that has rendered Noida such a ‘difficult spot’. In the next section we build a characterisation of a tripartite of spatial nodes in Noida, demonstrating the relative and relational complexities that inhabit this space.

4 Spatial Upheaval in Noida: Urban Enclaves, Rural Ghettos, and *Jhuggi Jhopdis*

The growth of new towns and cities in India is usually celebrated as symbolic of a burgeoning Indian modernity, representing an emboldened and emerging new middle class *spatial identity* (Yadav 2012; emphasis added). As old metropolises are ceded to the existing mix of wealth and squalor, new towns are being developed by carving out a space (land) from peasants and rural manufacturers instead, relegating them to almost a second class status.

This in itself is not a new observation. In India’s rural political economy, land is arguably one of biggest sites of struggle, and while displacement from land and concomitant dispossession of economic and social capital dates back to the colonial times, it is all too familiar an occurrence in modern (neoliberal) India. However, much of the literature on land acquisition and displacement treats ‘land’ as an absolute space. It is a space that can be *possessed*, *grabbed*, *enclosed* or *displaced from*,

and these acts and their subsequent consequences are usually the subject of examination,¹² but not the space itself. But as argued before, we propose to take a step back, and try to understand the nature of the space instead. The next section thus provides a brief overview of the development of Noida, but rather than recounting just a history of urbanisation, the focus is to highlight a tripartite of spatial configurations that took shape in the area.

4.1 The Urban Enclaves

Noida is located in the *Gautambuddh Nagar* district in Uttar Pradesh, about 25 kilometres southeast of Delhi. It is bound on the west and southwest by the *Yamuna* River, on the north and northwest by Delhi, on the northeast by the Delhi and Ghaziabad, and on the north-east, east and south-east by the *Hindon* River (see figure 2). The city came into formal existence on 17 April 1976, when the Uttar Pradesh government notified 36 villages on the eastern periphery of Delhi for land acquisition. The city was named after the newly created autonomous development body, the New Okhla Industrial Development Authority (NOIDA). As it's apparent from the name, the principal objective was to create a planned industrial town, originally estimating to generate around 220000 jobs and house a million residents (Potter and Kumar, 2004). There have been several successive revisions of the initial plans, leading to Master Plans for 2001, 2011, 2021, and the latest, 2031. As per the 2011 census, the population of Noida was 642,381, and the latest master plan predicts a net population of more than 2.5 million by 2031.

Land Use	1995		1998		2001		2011		2021 (approved)		2031 (proposed)	
	Area (hect ares)	%										
Residential	1131	42.2	1607	35.5	1870	49.2	3672	47.1	5334	35.7	5722	37.5
Commercial	132	4.9	36	0.8	230	6.1	431	5.5	564	3.8	581	3.8
Industrial	811	30.2	1092	24.1	495	13.0	985	12.7	3001	20.1	2806	18.4
Transport	365	13.6	1013	22.4	495	13.0	941	12.1	2211	14.9	1942	12.7

Source: Potter and Kumar (2004), Noida Master Plans 2001, 2031

Present day Noida covers the land of 81 erstwhile villages, an area of 20316 hectares (Noida Master Plan, 2031). The area has two distinct types of land-use patterns: (a) the planned industrial part, developed during the 1980s and early 1990s; and (b) the residential part developed in the form of individual 'sectors'. An average 'sector' measures about 55 hectares and is proposed to have a mixed form of development (group, public and/or private housing), catering to a socio-economic mix appropriate for each sector. It is in the development of these residential spaces that a gradual structural break emerges from the notion of Noida as an industrial township, towards becoming a modern urban landscape with luxury residential enclaves, a trend that gathered significant pace in the 2000s. Table 1 documents this change clearly, as the alterations in land use pattern show a steady shift towards residential developments becoming the priority. The structural break is particularly noticeable post-2001, as the allocation for the absolute amount of residential land jumps by 96% between 2001 and 2011, occupying close to 50% of the entire area. Even a cursory visual glance at the city itself confirms these observations, as almost everywhere in Noida one can see high rise luxury enclaves being constructed, along with golf courses, glitzy shopping malls and other similar facilities for the upper class.¹³

¹² See Gardner and Gerharz (2016) for a detailed review.

¹³ Also noteworthy is the 100%+ increase in the persons per hectare (PPH) allocations, increased from 700 to 1650 PPH in 2008, indicating that Noida was to become a city with skyscrapers (Master Plan, 2031). The two largest political parties of that period in Uttar Pradesh – *Samajwadi Party* (SP) and *Bahujan Samajwadi Party* (BSP), coming to power in alternative elections – also had a crucial role to play. A deep nexus developed between Authority officials, senior bureaucrats, builders and local political leaders, with allegations of kickbacks, bribes, and ad-hoc sanctions becoming increasingly frequent in this period.

4.2 The Rural Ghettos

Albeit often overlooked in the overall growth story of Noida, the concomitant changes in the condition of the villages form an important part of this story. As mentioned before, the entire area of Noida covers 81 erstwhile villages. Around 50 villages were notified for land acquisition during 1976-78. Over the next ten years, all 81 villages were gradually notified, with Noida becoming a census town (CT) in 1991. Table 2 summarises the population changes in the urban and rural areas of Noida from 1981-2001 (post-2001, village population is counted as part of Noida CT population).

So what is the condition of these villages today? They continue to exist, but in a severely constricted manner, as the development of the city required all the cultivable land around each village, with only the habitational parts left out. Engulfed within the urban sectors, remnants of these villages are euphemistically referred to as *urban villages* (somewhat developed with better road connectivity with the urban sections). However, irrespective of the euphemism, and despite several promises by the Authority to undertake necessary developmental work, there remains a stark contrast between the posh urban enclaves and the sorry state of the villages. A Times of India report recently observed:

Step into an urban village and one is greeted with the rural-urban divide in the city which is brought out so evidently by the narrow lanes, filthy gullies and heaps of garbage on the alleys of these villages (Salaria, 2016)

The villages have essentially become extremely dense living quarters with burgeoning population, but with hardly any public spaces, along with choked sewage system, narrow roads, and unsafe residential structures. Having lost their agricultural livelihoods, the primary occupation of the villagers is to rent out low-cost accommodations to migrant workers, daily wagers, small-scale businessmen (local shop owners, etc.), and others associated with the urban settlements (security guards, drivers, etc.), which has led to a severe increase in population and associated pressure on the already limited civic services (the population increased by 172% between 1991-2001, see Table 2, and continues to rise as the city grows).

Year	Population			Growth %		
	Noida Urban	Noida Rural	Noida Notified	Urban	Rural	Total
1981	-	36972	36972	-	-	-
1991	146514	34489	181003	-	-7.44	388.85
2001	305058	93390	398448	108.21	172.89	120.46

Source: Noida Master Plan, 2031

We refer to this spatial constriction of the villages as a process of *rural ghettoisation*. The word 'ghetto', as Mitchell Duneier powerfully argues, is understandably disliked 'for its associations with stigmatizing and harmful stereotypes' (2016:ix-x). However, the notion of ghettoisation continues to remain more relevant than ever, and not just in the sense of physical segregation, but as a *space* for intrusive social control of the poor (ibid.). Taking a cue from this observation, the metamorphosis of Noida villages can be seen as the production of *rural ghettos* enclosed by the urban enclaves, but with their own distinct materiality, history, and politics.

Figures 1 and 2 depict this spatial transformation in its most absolute/physical sense. Figure 1 shows the original composition of the biggest villages in Noida prior to acquisition, while Figure 2 shows how they have become ghettoised within the urban sectors at present (the orange patches). As it can be seen, the villages are now constricted from all sides, thus resulting in intensely condensed living conditions. This is more explicitly observable in the detailed maps of individual sectors of Noida, a

sample of which have been presented in Figures 3-5, showing how the urban enclaves encircle the villages of *Nayabans*, *Atta*, and *Sadarapur*.

How is everyday life in these ghettos? There are three crucial elements that stand out. First, and the most immediate effect, is the severe population pressure and deterioration in living conditions, as more people (original inhabitants and outside tenants) now live in a much smaller area. Second, the loss of all forms of political representation due to the abolishment of the *panchayats* (village councils) in 2015, as these areas are now a part of an industrial township.¹⁴ Not only has this rendered the villagers completely voiceless, but has also allowed the Authority to prioritise the urban affairs far ahead of the villages, the unregulated nature of the latter being only a concern as far as it threatens the planned nature of the city. The 2031 Master Plan reads: ‘...a significant proportion of the population growth in the villages may be taking place due to unplanned growth of the village settlements...[which] may create problems for planned development of Noida’ (p.15). Third, a sense of absolute institutional fuzziness now engulfs the villages, as they are completely dependent on the Authority for their everyday existence – from installing streetlights to provision of education and healthcare – but with no representative hold over it. Alongside, a significant proportion of village dwellers are also engaged in legal battles with the Authority over ownership of disputed land, making them ‘encroachers’ in the Authority’s eye (see Figure 5, where the encroached area is also marked alongside *Sadarapur* village).

4.3 The Jhuggi Jhopdis

The third element of this space, but even more overlooked, are the *jhuggi jhopdi* clusters or hutments. These are unauthorised and unplanned squatter colonies inhabited by industrial workers, migrant labourers, and domestic maids working in Noida. The formation of the *jhuggi jhopdis* is not a recent phenomenon. By 1995, 20% of the entire Noida population lived in *jhuggi* clusters, while 48% lived in the urbanised villages, and only 32% in the developed residential sectors (Noida Master Plan, 2031). In 2008, a detailed survey was conducted by the Authority, indicating that there are about 11000 *jhuggi* clusters in the phase-I industrial area (sectors four, five, eight, nine and ten) alone (Noida Master Plan, 2031¹⁵). But no further details have been furnished on how these decade old colonies will be integrated with the posh urban sectors. In fact, the total number of *jhuggis jhopdis* is far more than 11000 in just a handful of sectors. They are a common sight across entire Noida: temporary structures constructed mostly on disputed plots, or by builders/promoters on their construction sites. There are no estimates available on the total number, but *jhuggi jhopdis* can be found in both the industrial areas as well as in almost every sector with large scale housing projects. For those inhabiting the *jhopdis*, there are no legal contracts or tenancy rights, limited access to water and electricity (usually provided by the landowner or the promoter via some temporary arrangement), and absolutely no social or welfare services. Das and Walton (2015) also question the Authority’s survey results, saying ‘the number of jhuggis identified were far fewer than the actual existing jhuggis...the website mentioned 525 jhuggis in Sector 5 whereas our census showed 830 jhuggis in one cluster alone in this sector’ (551).

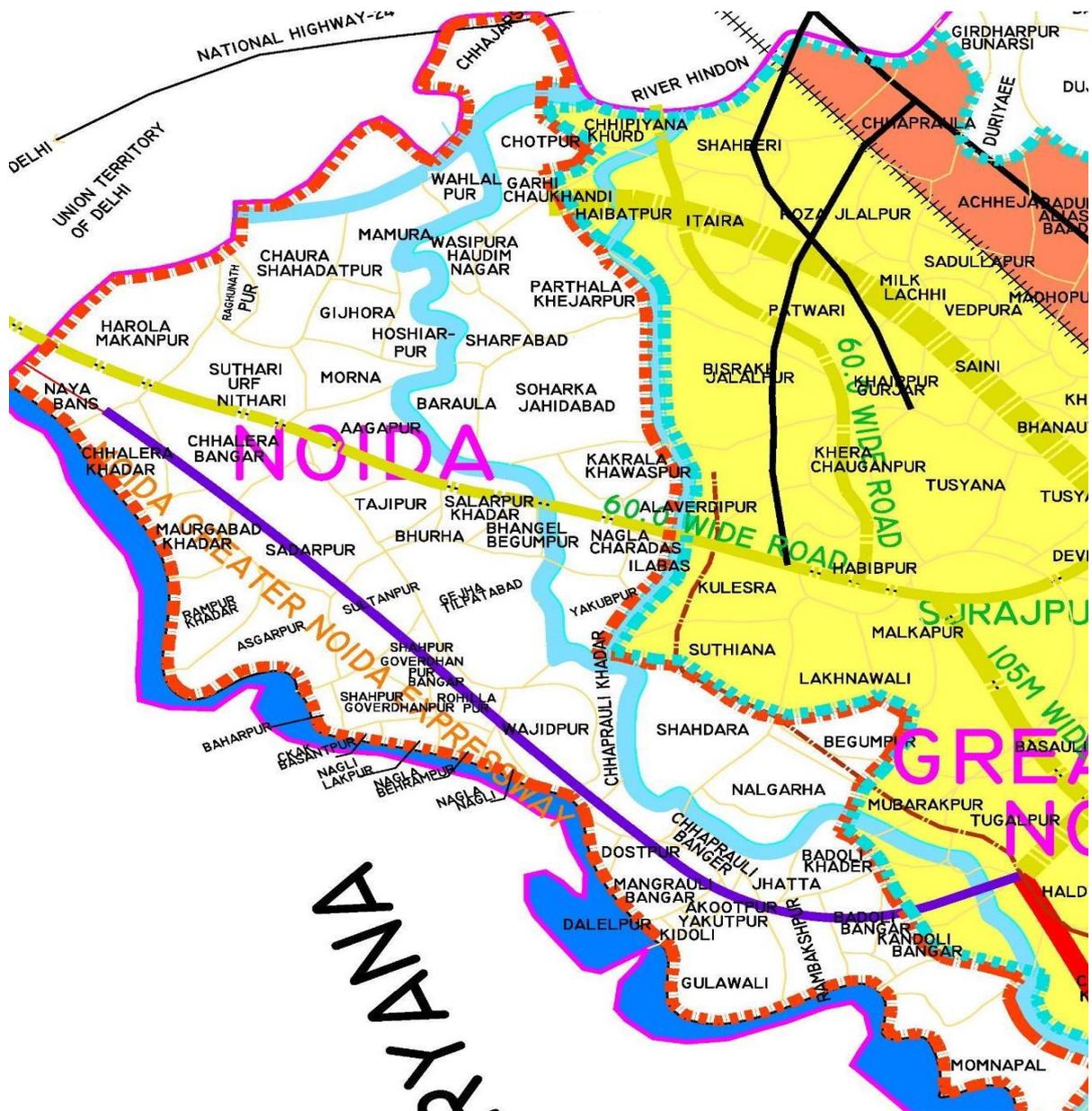
The story of spatial upheaval in Noida has thus brought us to recognising three types of spatial nodes: the posh gated urban enclaves, the rural ghettos, and the *jhuggis jhopdis*. Figure 6 gives a representative and relative snapshot of this unique spatial juxtaposition in the 7X section of Noida (the area occupied by sectors 70-79, *Mahagun Moderne* being located in sector 78. Most of the post-2000 urbanised sectors of Noida exhibit a similar spatial character). In this figure, the urban enclaves are clearly marked, as is the village *Sharfabad* ghettoised within the area, along with a few other ghettos (*Sorkha*, *Baraula* etc.) along the periphery of the region. The complete absence of the *jhuggi jhopdis* from the map (which is a part of the 2031 Master Plan) is equally indicative about the Authority’s vision and priority, as there are two major *jhuggi* clusters in the area, one in sector 76, and another just on the other side of the canal in front of sector 76, adjacent to the village *Baraula*. We estimated around 2000 people living in these two clusters, the men mostly being construction workers, and the

¹⁴ Interestingly, neither is there a municipal council in Noida. The Authority is the sole governing body with a CEO, and has absolutely no public representation.

¹⁵ Available at <https://www.noidaauthorityonline.com/Survey.html>

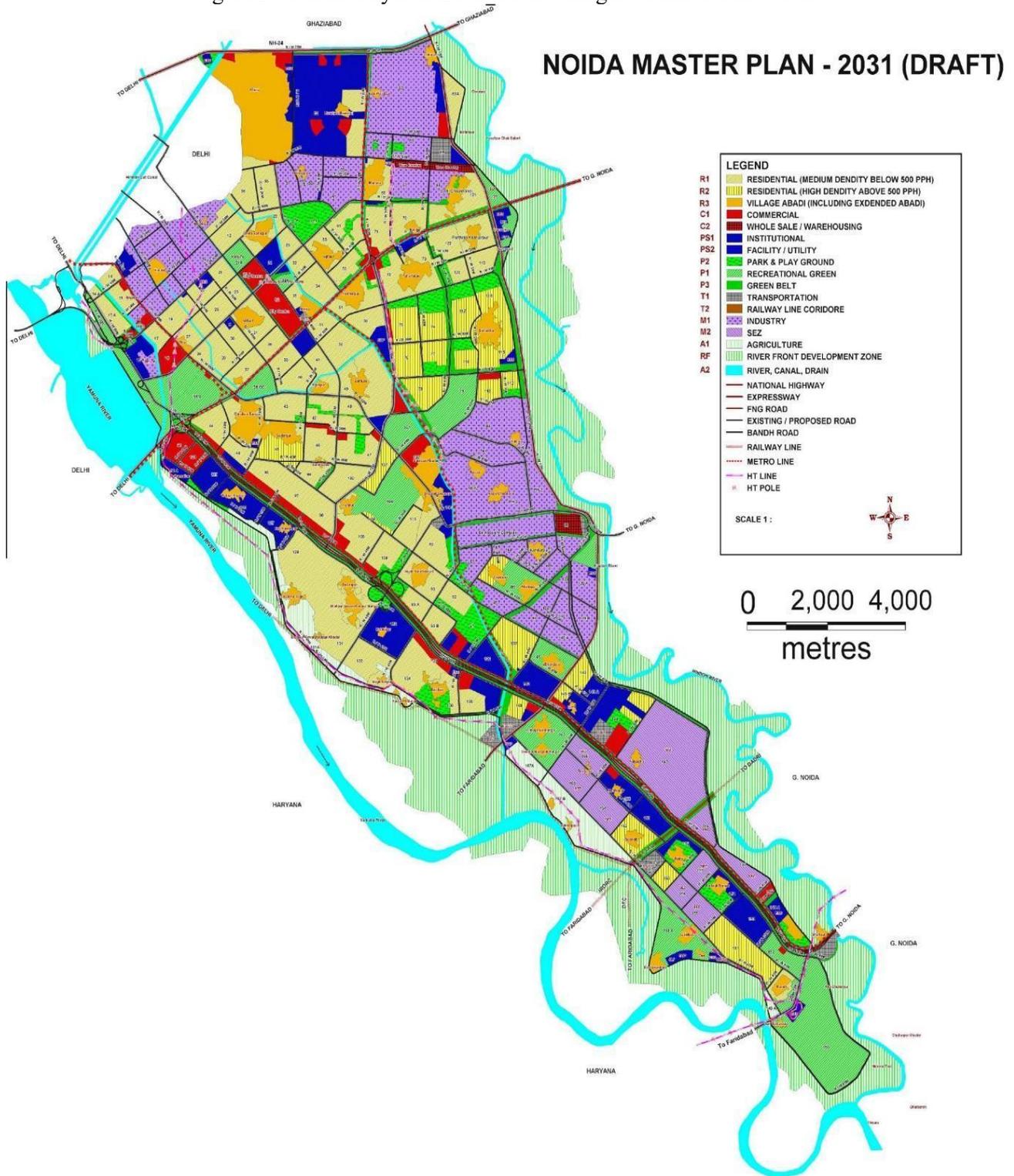
women working as housemaids. In fact, *Johra*, the maid in question in the *Mahagun* incident, came from the *jhuggi* cluster next to *Baraula*. Identifying this relative space across the three nodes is crucial, as we argue next that the form of politics taking shape in the area is both sustaining and is enabled by this unique spatial character, where three different *places* (i.e. specific sites of structured social inter-relations and related identities) coexist with each other, and are engaged in a constant effort to produce their own *logic of differences*.

Figure 1: Major Villages of Noida Prior to Acquisition



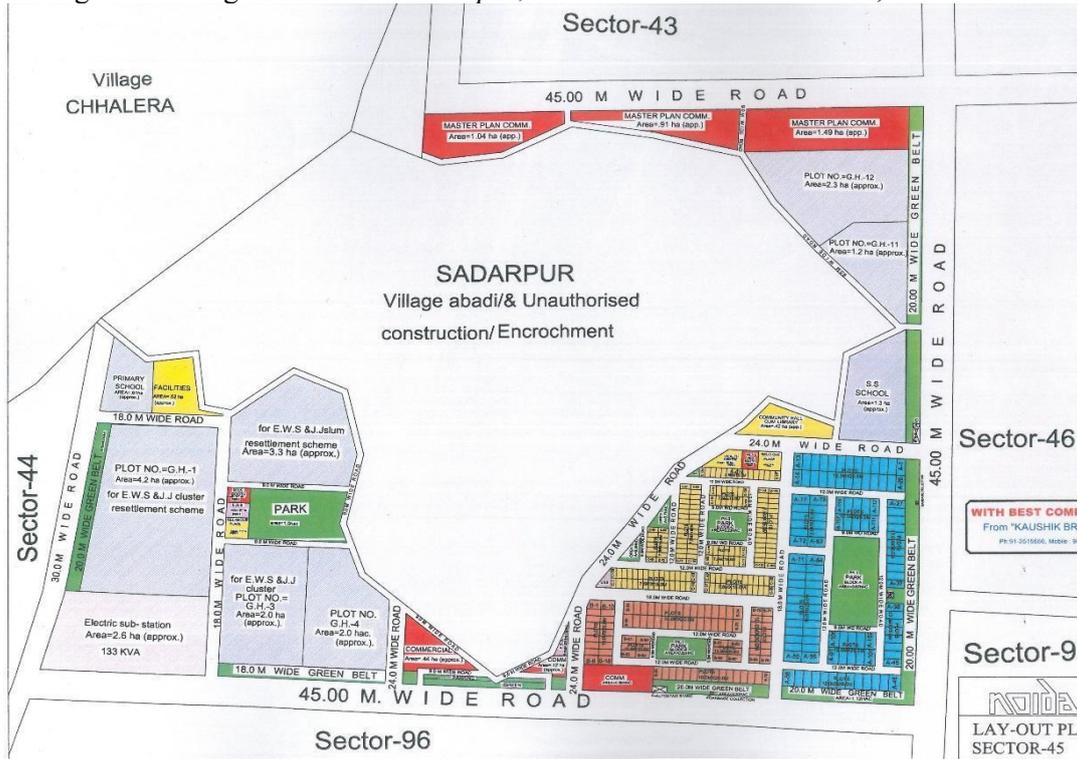
Source: Noida Map Book (2017)

Figure 2: Current Physical Location of Villages within Urban Sectors



Source: Noida Master Plan 2031

Figure 5: Village Chhalera & Sadarpur, Ghettoised within Sectors 68, 123 and 121



Source: Noida Map Book (2017)

Figure 6: The 7X Area (Sectors 70-79)



Source: Noida Master Plan, 2031

5. The Production of Authoritarian Populism via a Politics of Aestheticisation

We now return the story to its final analytical strand, and examine how this difficult relational and relative space gave rise to its own peculiar politics of aestheticisation. The nature of this politics can be witnessed both within each of the three spatial nodes as well as at the interfaces, i.e. the way each node produces its internal social space, and then how that internal space sustains itself by producing its own logic of difference in relation to the other nodes. The result is a continuous process of *othering*, with the seeds of authoritarianism being embedded in such exclusionary tendencies.

5.1 Spatial Practices in the Urban Enclaves: Homogeneity and the Threat of the Outsiders

The spatial practices in the gated urban communities essentially have a dual objective: one, maintaining internal homogeneity, and two, producing difference with the outside. These impulses of homogeneity and difference have implications for the contours of political practices as well as for the discursive and associational forms these political practices take. It is in the everyday political practices, and the kind of institutional forms it takes that this spatial homogeneity and difference is maintained and reproduced.

Homogeneity is mostly achieved through similar forms of economic, social and cultural capitals. A typical inhabitant of this urban space represents the prosperous Indian middle class that has become commonplace in both domestic cultural representations and the international political rhetoric on India's booming globalising economy (Fernandes, 2006): a member of an opulent social group whose growing consumption capacity symbolises the benefits of liberalisation and also drives liberalisation forward (Lakha, 1999). They would also typically be working professionals (usually in IT, Banking or related fields), relatively young (in the 30-40 age bracket), had gone to technological institutes for their education, and upper caste Hindus. Another crucial feature of these residents is their familiarity and intimacy with virtual communication mediums, but a relative unfamiliarity with more conventional methods of social or political interactions. They are also firm believers in meritocracy; assuming that those who are not successful as they are is due their lack of merit. An astute characterisation of this middle class resident was made by *Shailendra Barnwal*, a teacher and political activist, residing in one of the 7X housing societies:

I wonder what else do they do except for ordering things online and tweeting¹⁶

Barnwal was referring to the penchant of the middle-class residents for engaging with the world outside of their enclaves not in actual physical sense but only through virtual mediums. The comment is incisive in the sense that it captured the technology-mediated mode that the residents preferred to engage with the world outside. The comment also hinted at the complex relationship that the residents seem to have with 'outside'. The distinction between 'inside' and 'outside' is also firmly established for these enclaves. Everything inside the gates and boundary walls is planned, homogenous (both in terms of the people who inhabit and the uniform aesthetics of the space itself), secured and sanitised via a bevy of private security guards, maintenance and housekeeping personnel, and technologically mediated (electronic surveillance, biometric or app based protocols, and WhatsApp group-based communication). And it is via an active persuasion of 'maintaining' this internal homogeneity that an image of the 'outside' is created, which is unruly, unpleasant, and above all, threatening. As was witnessed in the *Mahagun* case, the overwhelming need for security becomes a catch-all phrase through which the internal space is constantly being maintained and reproduced, while at the same time actively producing and promoting a difference with the 'outside'. While it is the difference and distance that is crucial for 'maintenance' inside the gate, it is equally difficult to keep the outside world entirely outside. There are material and social linkages, i.e. people and services from outside that the residents require. The challenge therefore is to maintain the difference and distance and yet providing access to groups of people, commodities and services from the outside.

¹⁶ Interview, Sector 76, Noida; 6th September 2017

For the residents, the most problematic category seeking entry into the enclaves are the housemaids. Though the most frequent visitors, they are also the most 'different': shabbily dressed, often malnourished, usually speaking a different language, and hardly befitting the way the residents perceive their space. Additionally, the maids come from their rented homes in the *jhuggi jhopdis* or the villages nearby, the two types of spaces that stand in contrast to the space inside the enclaves. When a maid enters the enclave, she brings a bit of slum, a bit of village with her. The challenge before the 'gatekeeping' is to keep the slum and the village out while allowing the maid inside. Predictably, the protocol for the entry of maids into the enclaves is the most elaborate, starting from a police verification, to issuing identity and access cards, closely controlled and monitored entry and exits, physical checks (separate women guards are employed for this purpose), separate service elevators, no access to any of the open areas to spend time or even rest. These are seldom formally written guidelines, but are communicated to the maids in no uncertain terms by the maintenance staff.

The protocol of controlling the maids (along with other visitors from the 'outside' such as drivers, milkman, etc.) inside enclaves also carries a larger purpose of differentiation. It represents a vision of the residents' relationship with the *jhuggi jhopdis* and the rural ghettos. The securitisation of these urban spaces is premised on the potential risk that any association with the outsiders entails. The risk is located in the perception of maids or the villagers in the streets outside being different: 'everybody is a thief outside, we feel so vulnerable whenever we are on the streets', being a sentiment heard most frequently (although crime rate in the area is nothing exceptional). This is a difference that is manifested most expressly in their spatial location. For the residents, the *jhuggis* represent illegally existing spatial aberration that does not fit into their ideal space. Similarly, the ghettoised villages represent a habitational relic from the past that has gotten deformed under the pressure of much desired change. The risk that is expressed mostly in terms of a risk of theft or robbery at public places, is premised on the idea that people who inhabit that aberration or that deformity, are susceptible of indulging in such acts.

5.2. Spatial Practices in the Rural Ghettos: Multidimensionality and Logic of Difference

Let us now turn to the second node of our spatial tripartite, that of the rural ghettos. What are the broad degrees of differentiability inside these ghettoised spaces (as well as in relation to the two other nodes), and how are these differences practiced politically at an everyday level? The politics here is distinct in its own ways, and needs to be understood in its relational as well as representational forms.

The first characterisation of this space is in its layered nature. Here economic capital is not the homogenising force, instead, there is a continuous perpetuation of the traditional hierarchies of caste, gender etc. Most villages are a spatial congregation of a certain caste. For example, *Sharfabad*, one of the villages within the 7X area, is primarily a village of the *Yadavs*. One of the largest villages in the area, *Chhalera*, is primarily inhabited by the *Chauhans*, *Rohillapur* is a village of the *Gurjars*, and so on. Caste based hierarchies continue to be a key marker in the villages – and while that in itself is not surprising given the overall political trends of the area (caste-politics has been a prominent feature of Uttar Pradesh for decades) – it is interesting to observe how caste allows village elders to stake a moral claim to the place. *Brijendra Chauhan*, an octogenarian is *Chhalera*, proudly asserts:

I don't have any land left. I can't work anymore. But still ask anyone in the village, they will know me. This is my land, my place, my home¹⁷

Chauhan's claim to the place therefore does not originate from a notion of economic possession, but from a certain degree of social capital. He further explains how he was dispossessed as a result of the acquisition process, being completely dependent on some of his relatives for daily sustenance. But that does not stop him from claiming his position in the place as someone who is respected by all for what he was, and he was one of the leaders of his caste, not only in *Chhalera*, but also in adjoining localities. Figures like *Chauhan* can be found in almost every village of Noida.

¹⁷ Interview; *Chhalera*, 20th Dec 2017.

In contrast, another prominent section in the villagers are those who might not have traditional social capital, but possess economic capital having received substantial compensation through the acquisition process. This is a section that is engaged in property development, can afford better healthcare and education for their children, etc. But the older brigade looks at them with disdain, precisely owing to their lack of social capital. *Malkan Singh Chauhan*, *Chhalera* resident, refers to these people as '*kal ka badshah*' (the king of only yesterday), accusing them to have made their riches overnight by selling their land via dubious means, which they could have never done had they possessed the *izzat* (respect) and the *pechchan* (identity) of the older generation¹⁸.

There is also a third section among the villagers, who are largely impoverished, and usually low caste. They possess neither the social nor the economic capital like the previous two groups, and find themselves in a rather hopeless situation, surviving primarily on odd jobs. *Ashok Ram*, a resident of *Baraula*, comments:

...neither am I like the village leaders, nor do I have enough money. Where do I go? *Yeh jayga* [this place] *was mine, and yet it has left me nowhere* (emphasis added).¹⁹

This is an extremely interesting observation, as to how impoverishment is being perceived as a direct consequence of a place. Unlike *Brijendra Chauhan* or *Malkan Singh Chauhan*, who stake a claim to the place owing to their social or cultural capital, *Ashok Ram*'s relates to the place through a sense of victimhood, and yet makes a claim to the place as his own, thus leading to a sense of betrayal.

The social space in the villages thus presents a rather composite and layered texture. There are diverse forms of associations exhibited by a range of social agents, endowed with different forms of capital. However, these contested relations seem to converge at a higher level, as in spite of the internal differences in terms of traditional hierarchies or possession of capital, there is also a certain kind of disposition about 'belonging to the village': a habitus in a Bourdieusian sense, or a spatial identity as per Harvey. There seems to be a sense of *being from a certain village* that overrides the other differences. *Omkar Chauhan*, a local milk distributor in *Chhalera* village, says with a sense of pride:

Yes, there are differences among the higher and lower [in terms of caste], the ones who have money and the ones who don't. But when it comes to the village, we all are one. We are from *Chhalera*, that's our most important identity.²⁰

What's the source of this identity? Is it tradition, hierarchy, honour or something else? While all of these are significant, it seems that the overarching cohesion also has an important spatial dimension. *Omkar Chauhan* explains:

We were farmers, but our land is gone. We have been confined to this tiny area and encircled by these big buildings. If we have to save our space, we have to be one.²¹

Begraj Gurjar, leader of BHANU (*Bharatiya Kisan Union, or Indian Farmers' Union*), sitting in protest against allegations of encroachment brought by the Authority, explains further:

Who are we today? Neither are we farmers, nor are we residents of Noida city. We are villagers, but have gotten lost within the sectors. We don't know what to do, as they have taken away the only thing we knew how to. Noida's farmers are in a jail today, and will have to remain so for life. All we can do is to unite.²²

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Interview; *Noida City Magistrates Court*, 19th Dec 2017.

²⁰ Interview; *Chhalera*, 20th Dec 2017z

²¹ Ibid.

²² Interview; *Noida Authority Office*, 14th Sep 2017

It's therefore the spatial condition – the constriction/being encircled/jailed - that has brought about an urgent social cohesion among the villagers. In turn, this spatial concentration also creates a certain kind of disposition, leading to matrix of group formation, the group identity being that of the villagers or dispossessed farmers. And it is the representational aspect of this group - a very distinct spatial identity of being from a certain village, and sharing a common sense of loss also defined in spatial terms – that enables the villagers to produce their logic of difference vis-à-vis the 'others'.

Who are the 'others'? In a basic sense, anybody who comes from outside the village is an 'other'. Such a conceptualisation once again has a very direct spatial connotation to it. The most immediate 'other' here are the large number of tenants who have come to the villages for cheap accommodation, and have become a crucial part of the village economy, tenancy being the most common source of income for villagers. The 'other' here can therefore never be completely excluded (unlike the practices in the urban enclaves), and yet it is important to distinguish them to be so. This is where the logic of difference takes root, with a very clear sense on part of the social agents to legitimise and preserve social separations. *Ajit Singh Tomar*, a long-time resident of *Rohillapur*, laments:

They are undeniably our bread and butter, but so many different people are also *polluting* our village (emphasis added)²³

Alongside the tenants, there is another kind of othering that takes place simultaneously, and in a more segregated form. This is the othering of the urban dwellers, and is a process that is mutually reinforcing, with the latter being equally committed to maintaining the separation. The 'others' internal to the space are still somewhat accepted as part of the larger social fabric, and there are instances of engagement within more intimate and familial spaces (such as being invited to weddings), but not so with the city dwellers. However, this is a more textured process, a product of multiple relationalities.

Lokesh Chauhan, a senior journalist of a *Dainik Jagaran*, a prominent Hindi newspaper, gives an astute summary:

There is a clear antagonism towards the city. First, there is a physical disparity in everyday existence. The city has all the facilities and services while the villages suffer from a lack of even the most basic provisions. Second, there is a sense of betrayal due to the broken promises of no jobs and lack of development. Third, there is an emotional connection with the land owned for generations, but are now occupied by *outsiders* [emphasis added]. Fourth, the complete political marginalisation and lack of representation once the *panchayats* were dismantled.²⁴

If we are to unpack these relationalities, all of these can be seen to have a direct spatial connotation. The physical disparities are the most obvious of all, and is a fundamental feature of the process of ghettoisation as discussed earlier. The second element stems from being the losers of development, despite being given assurances on the contrary. Prior to land acquisition, all villagers were promised jobs in the industries that were to be set up in Noida, priority school admission for the children, five to ten percent share in the developed land, and so on. However, hardly any of these have materialised. After the first two phases, hardly any new industry came up in Noida, and whatever new jobs were generated, villagers are actively discriminated against. The big, internationally accredited schools that have been established cater to mostly the urban elites, and numerous instances can be heard in the villages where their children have been refused admission. *Ghanashyam Yadav*, resident of *Gijhor* village, gives an evocative account of this discrimination:

²³ Interview; *Rohillapur*, 17th Dec 2017.

²⁴ Interview; *Shopprix Mall, Sector 61*, Noida, 7th Sep 2017.

The factory managers can recognise us to be villagers. However, if we say that we live in a sector, then they ask about our parents and grandparents. If we say that our ancestors are also from Noida, then they immediately understand that we are villagers. The schools are even more direct, they will not even entertain us if my child's prior mark sheet is from a local government school.²⁵

Third, the dimension of continued emotional connection with land, which is a recurring theme in the wider literature on land and displacement, is evident in case of Noida too. The displacement from land does not only induce a dispossession of economic or social capital, but that of memories as well, of which one's identity is a product. While the socio-economic relations of production dominate much of the discussion, it is also important to recognise the personal void that development-induced dispossession brings about. *Lokesh Chauhan*, quoted earlier, had grown up in *Baraula* village himself, and describes his relatives who are still there:

Emotionally, they can't accept that their land is gone. They still claim that people residing there are outsiders, while they themselves have grown up on that land, and recognise every corner of it. In fact, they often take their guests to see a big housing enclave, proudly pointing out that it is their land on which the skyscrapers stand.²⁶

'They have had to let go of their land', *Lokesh Chauhan* adds, but they are not ready to let go of their memories, which financial compensations can hardly replace. They continue to live in the past' (ibid.). It is a past that is intertwined with their identity as landowners, and the new occupants of that space - even if the legally the owners - can never stake the moral claim to that space, and remain the perpetual outsiders.

The fourth and final strand, possibly the most crucial, hardly finds a mention outside the villages. It concerns the complete lack of political representation for dispossessed villages. As discussed earlier, the dismantling of the *panchayat* system has dealt a severe blow to the political life of the villagers. Not only have they have no representation at any level, they have also become completely marginalised in the national electoral landscape. Traditionally, all the four major parties have had their support bases in the villages (BJP, BSP, SP, and Congress), but with no *panchayats*, there's not much stake left in village politics, whereas the burgeoning population in the urban enclaves means a far bigger, influential and homogeneous voting bloc for the state and national elections. *Uday Ram*, a *panchayat pradhan* (head) in the *Sharfabad* area, astutely observes:

Neither have we got any voice, nor any representation. And why would we? Look at the city, thousands of flats, million people, but only a few thousand in a village. Every party knows that it's the city people who can win them elections.²⁷

There is therefore a continuous production of a logic of difference against the 'others' that take shape via these multiple and multi-layered spatial practices. Taken together with the starker forms of discrimination practiced by the urban enclaves, this is a doubly-reinforcing process, one that dominates everyday life in the villages.

5.3 Spatial Practices in the Jhuggi Jhopdis: The Invisible Others

The third and final node of our spatial tripartite, the *jhuggi jhopdis*, and the people living there, are the *invisible inhabitants* of Noida, neatly hidden away from the view of the skyscrapers promising 'five-star luxury' and 'global living standards'. The *jhuggis* stand in isolation vis-à-vis both the urban enclaves and the rural ghettos, with the inhabitants having hardly any right or control over their everyday existence, and much of their spatial practices take shape in response to their treatment by the

²⁵ Interview; *Gijhor*, 12th Sep 2017.

²⁶ Interview; *Shopprix Mall, Sector 61*, Noida, 7th Sep 2017.

²⁷ Interview; *Sharfabad*, 15th Sep 2017.

two other nodes. They are subservient ‘others’ for the city dwellers (the housemaids and construction workers) who need to be controlled through a strict security regime (and thus becoming illegal immigrants at the first sign of defiance), and the ‘pollutants’ for the villagers, a threat to their traditional customs, norms and hierarchy.

In one of the largest *jhuggi* clusters in the area in sector 76, there are about 200 families with more than a thousand inhabitants. Almost everyone is Muslim, have migrated from the state of West Bengal²⁸, all the men work as labourers/carpenters/plumbers, while the women are housemaids. The cluster is hard to miss, as it is adjacent to one of the largest urban enclaves in the area (*Silicon City*), and directly opposite to *Mahagun Moderne*, and yet it is a world away from the glitz of these posh quarters. The *jhuggis* stand on a disputed plot owned by a villager from nearby *Baraula*, is an extremely congested place of brick and tin shanties with each family (sometime up to 5/6 members) occupying only one tiny room, with 8-10 families sharing a toilet. There is no public space, education/healthcare facilities available, and the dwellers are completely dependent on the landowner for even the most basic services. Their electricity connection (not a permanent, legal connection but unauthorised ‘hooking’ from the housings nearby) was cut off following the *Mahagun* incident as a punishment (although the congregated crowd was from a different *jhuggi* cluster), and they have been living in the dark for over 3 months.

What are the spatial practices in the *jhuggi jhopdis*? In contrast to the two other nodes, there is a clear disassociation that the inhabitants practice from this space. *Amina Bibi*, a lady who has been living in Noida for over two decades, emphatically asserts:

We don’t belong here. Our own land and identity is all in Bengal. We are Bengalis. We have nothing to do with this place. We just work here.²⁹

This disassociation is also in essence producing logic of difference in its own terms, or is a reverse aestheticisation of politics, where the residents refuse to imbibe any meaning to the space they inhabit. This is a process that has taken shape via two factors, (a) a strong association with their homeland, and (b) through years of neglect and disrespect as migrants. The former is clearly evident, as all of the *jhuggi* residents have family, land and ties back in West Bengal, they periodically go back to their villages, especially in the monsoons to do farming in their own land, and most importantly, to vote. There was a unanimous consensus among all the *jhuggi* residents we spoke to about going back to vote in the *panchayat*, assembly and national elections. Upon probing why this is so important, *Amina Bibi* responded:

What about the roads in my village? What about electricity? How will these get done unless we vote there? That is our home, we have to take care of that place. Where else will we vote?³⁰

This association is bolstered through the abject living conditions and neglect that they suffer on a daily basis. In spite of living in these *jhopdis* for decades, they are completely at the mercy of the landowners and builders, and can be evicted even without a day’s notice (as was the case post-*Mahagun*). Furthermore, as migrant labourers, they are actively discriminated against. *Masood Alam*, a carpenter who works in *Mahagun*, explains:

Whenever we have to go to the Authority, they always treat us differently. I actually tried to become a voter here. But they discouraged me, saying ‘you are from outside, we don’t want you here’. We are poor, so we have to bear a lot. Our condition is like that old proverb: *a god in*

²⁸ Apart from West Bengal, migration from other states like Bihar, Jharkhand and eastern Uttar Pradesh is also fairly common.

²⁹ Interview; *Jhuggi jhopdi* cluster in sector 76, 20th Sep 2017.

³⁰ Ibid.

*your own land, but a dog outside. Anyone can come and slap us, we can say nothing (emphasis added).*³¹

Masood's comments astutely summarise the condition of the *jhuggi* inhabitants, as well as lay down the spatial markers of their condition. Their everyday existence is an enforcer of their 'outsider' identity: suspiciously looked at on account of speaking a different language (especially the language of Bangladeshis), with zero political capital (not being voters in local elections), and absolutely no claim over the place they inhabit. As a result, in spite of the critical function they serve in city's socio-economic fabric, they strongly reject any claim to the space as their own. It is not their *place* where they have no voice and is at others' mercy, but is just a space they work in, deriving their identity from and staking a claim to a place thousands of miles away.

5.4 The Production of Authoritarian Populism

We are now in a position to bring these multidimensional spatial practices together to see how they enable authoritarian populist trends, both as witnessed in the *Mahagan* incident and otherwise. Given the diverse forms of othering, practices of spatial segregation, employment of ethno-religious identities, and accumulation of superior forms of capital – it is not hard to see how the social space in Noida resembles Bourdieu's description of a 'difficult spot', in which cohabiting social groups with divergent dispositions are forced to confront each other on every day basis. This confrontation essentially takes the shape of pursuing a logic of difference - and to complicate matters further - in three different ways by the three spatial nodes. The residents of the urban spaces are continuously reproducing their spatial superiority and exclusivity; the residents of the rural ghettos are trying to mobilise their rapidly marginalising political agency by forging internal alliances as original inhabitants and moral guardians of the space; and the *jhuggi jhopdi* residents, much in response to the previous two and living under constant neglect and discrimination, are engaged in a constant disassociation from the space. This difficult spot that is Noida of today is thus made up of competing forms of relative and relational spaces, where competing versions of aestheticisation of politics are being pursued on a daily basis.

Already hinted in the various forms of 'spatial othering' thus practiced, authoritarian populist trends can be seen to be directly ingrained in this space in various ways. First, as clearly evident in the *Mahagan* case, the kind of aestheticisation of politics practiced in the urban enclaves³² by its homogeneous, Hindu majority residents – with superior economic, social, and cultural capital – has the potential to metamorphose any *spatial aberration*, especially one with a security angle, into the *Hindutva* narrative of Hindu victimhood and any resultant inaction as minority appeasement. And once it does happen, it is rather easy for the right-wing elements (the local BJP, RSS, or other *Sangh Parivar* functionaries) to appropriate that as part of their grand, nationwide narrative of Hindu nationalism. In addition, the majority residents of these urban spaces precisely fits Jaffrelot's (2013) description of the new-urban middle classes who have benefitted from neo-liberal reforms, and are vociferous supporters of the Hindu nationalist project on social media platforms. For them, spatial difference is but an expression of the meritocratic game whereby its winners and losers are segregated. It is only logical that this difference is respected and perpetuated. The construction of an *imagined other* from their own *secure spaces*, with the technological apparatus to do so, is therefore a task not too onerous for this group. And when their *space is intruded* upon by Bengali speaking Muslims, the narrative of majority victimhood is but the most obvious choice.

The dynamics of the rural ghettos is somewhat more complex. Here caste dynamics matter, so does regional identities, a sense of moral victimhood, lack of political representation, spatial constriction, and traditions. Furthermore, the 'othering' here is also multidimensional. The tenants – though

³¹ Ibid.

³² It needs to be noted that here the aestheticisation discourse is preceded by a commoditisation of the space, a clarification Harvey does not provide.

outsiders – are a source of economic capital and thus has to be acquiesced to, whereas the urban others are a source of frustration (the outsiders who are the winners of the development process).

In the absence of any other form of political representation, the response here is to retreat into the *purity of traditions*. This is directly emblematic of Harvey's (1992) description of spaces being imbued with moral and mythical dimensions drawing from pre-modern values or ethnic roots. To most villagers, their space is not only of their forefathers, but also of traditions and myths, religious (*this is the land of Ram* [the Hindu deity] being a commonly heard expression) and nationalistic (*this is also the land of freedom fighters*). The only appropriate response to the *pollutant outsiders* is thus to reinforce traditions within the villages, which mostly take the form of spatially produced conservative practices (for example, caste and gender based segregations), engaging in traditional cultural activities (promoting indigenous wrestling pits called *akharas*, frequently cited in the stories of freedom struggle), and diligently practicing even the minor religious and cultural (Hindu) festivals. This in turn allows the *Hindutva* agenda to take root, as it is steeped in the same 19th century social customs and processes. The RSS nowadays can be increasingly seen to organise social and religious functions in the villages, and physical exercise camps in local grounds (upholding traditional activities such as yoga and wrestling). There is also an increasing affinity towards the RSS owing to the fact that BJP now rules both the state and the centre, and an association with the RSS has the potential to fetch political/social dividends.

6 Conclusion

In this final section, let us return to the wider argument about the spatial roots of contemporary (particularly post-2014) trends of authoritarian populism in India. The current mainstream political discourse in the country is in fact dominated by the sectarian religious forces of Hindu nationalism, which in turn is also serving as the political agency of a certain development narrative that promises to return India to its 'greatness of yore'. Furthermore, and perhaps more surprisingly, the pace with which such a narrative has found acceptance across the vast majority of Indian society – leading to a form of political homogeneity despite the country's tremendous diversity – is both perplexing and disturbing. However, our attempt in this paper has not been to provide an overarching theorisation of this development, nor have we tried to indicate a 'counter' political approach. Instead, we have tried to bring an oft ignored, yet critical connection of the analytical dialectic between contemporary moments of authoritarian populism and the ongoing processes of capital accumulation that are entrenching social inequalities further and deeper in the society.

In modern India, one of the most crucial transformations to have dramatically impacted the rural political economy is that of *spatial upheavals*, as capitalist accumulation through displacement-dispossession from land is now ongoing at an unprecedented scale. Through a plethora of development initiatives aimed at building new urban infrastructural projects, space is being reshaped, restructured, and being given new meanings to. The growth of new towns and smart cities are among the most large scale and widespread manifestations of this trend. Our central argument is that such upheaval does not only transform the physical or absolute space, but also gives rise to new forms of relative and relational spaces (Harvey, 2006), thereby bringing about strategic shifts in the political/ideological conjuncture, and change the 'balance of forces' (Hall, 1985), with usually a negative connotation for the rural areas. We further argue that such spatial upheaval often leads to the creation of 'difficult spots' (Bourdieu, 1985), where various social agents are actively engaged in producing competing social spaces via a perusal of material and symbolic differences. This is a process that leads to a continuous production and maintenance of social separations that were brought about by the restructuring in the first place. It is an intriguing dialectic, as the politics is a product of spatial restructuring, and is in turn about maintaining the restructured space. Following both Bourdieu (*ibid.*) and Hall (1985), we also point out that the state ensures a favourable balance of forces for the urban bourgeoisie to support its practices of life-style distinctions, whereas cohabiting social groups with lower social and economic capitals remain at a disadvantageous position.

Next, we argue that such spatial upheavals enable/create favourable conditions for authoritarian populism to take root. Note, we are not indicating a direct causal relationship here, nor are we claiming the former to be a sufficient condition for the latter. But given the contours of the current Hindu nationalist narrative – built on the notions of majority victimhood, minority appeasement, meritocracy, and a crisis of secular and liberal forms of political engagement³³ – a spatial segregation that favours the ‘meritorious’ and majority Hindu population therefore automatically affirms them as the rightful owner and controller of that space, and also their legitimate and prioritised incorporation into the Indian state. Any aberration of, or intrusion into that ‘controlled, secure and rightfully owned’ space cannot thus remain just a security breach, but is a threat to that moral claim of rightful Hindu majoritarianism. This is symptomatic of what Hall (ibid.:116) describes as a ‘moral panic’, demanding an ‘authoritarian closure’ legitimised by populist consent. As we saw in the case of Noida, an all-intrusive, 24/7 surveillance is but a welcome initiative in the urban enclaves, whereas the diverse and democratic population of the rural ghettos and *jhuggi jhopdis* are conflated with the image of a dangerous and threatening crowd, thereby allowing for the urban Hindu majority with superior capitals to be put ‘first’, while excluding others and generating tension all across society (Rancière, 2013).

To conclude, albeit neither deterministic nor causal, the new forms of spatial upheaval brought about by capitalist accumulation and contemporary moments of authoritarian populism in India are intrinsically related. The struggle between ‘the people’ and the ‘others’ that is at the heart of authoritarian populism (Scoones, Edelman *et al*, 2017:2) is often enabled by certain unique spatial configurations, and potentially becomes at some level a struggle between the competing groups to preserve their own material, cultural, and moral claim to what that space represents. It is the space that produces the politics, and becomes political in the process.

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³³ The terms *sickular* and *libtards* being firmly entrenched in the country’s political discourse at present.

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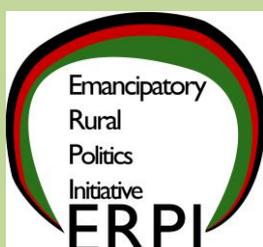
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