THE STORY OF YESHU NAGAR:

An Ethnographic Study of a Neighbourhood in a Delhi Campus Space

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The neighbourhood has been considered an essential analytical category in urban studies both in India and in global scholarship, for exploring various aspects of the city, its culture, emerging urban forms and characteristics of urban life. The city develops and is shaped by multiple institutions and actors inside and outside it- one of the most central is the State. Urban informality has been a vital mover of transformations in cityscapes, especially in the Global South, making it a topic of rich discussion in sociological literature on the State and the city. However, the State has not been a primary player in shaping cities in just the explicit sense of a government, but also through related social institutions. The university is one such element that has had a definitive impact on the development of many cities, especially a national capital such as Delhi, whose landscape is characterised by multiple central universities. Proximity to a campus space- and therefore to a student population- can leave profound marks on nearby areas. Our paper is an attempt at such a neighbourhood study, wherein we look at the neighbourhood of 'Yeshu Nagar' situated in the north campus area of the one of the largest central universities in India- the University of Delhi (henceforth abbreviated to DU). Our field site of Yeshu Nagar- named after its founding community of Indian Christians- is an unauthorised colony with a contested past, housing thousands of outstation students who study in DU or are in Delhi to prepare for competitive exams. As we explore the social history narratives of the neighbourhood and its everyday life, our study will touch on themes of neighbourhood culture and situate Yeshu Nagar within a setting of urban informality tied to the production of specific kinds of studentified spaces. We hope to add to the discourse on terrains of informality, look at the historical process behind the creation of spaces of exception, and analyse the various claims urban actors make to legitimate ownership in cities such as Delhi through the microcosm of Yeshu Nagar.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In analyzing the neighborhood of Yeshu Nagar, we began with Henri Lefebvre's seminal work, 'The Production of Space' (1991), where he argues that space should not be viewed in isolation from the material processes and social relations that constitute it, to avoid its fetishism. Mark Purcell's analysis, 'Possible Worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the Right to the City'(2013), further stresses that individuals' claims to urban spaces emanate from their everyday experience of inhabiting them, which can challenge the state's and capital's controlling claims. In contrast, David Harvey (2012, p. xv) argues that the concept of the right to the city is an "empty signifier" because claims to urban spaces depend upon individuals' access to who gets to make meanings. Access to spaces is also predicated on access to different forms of capital, as Bourdieu (1986) advanced.

Our investigation into Yeshu Nagar also engages with Arjun Appadurai's 'The Production of Locality' (1996), where locality is conceptualized as a relational aspect of social life. Appadurai argues that neighborhoods are existing social forms and are shaped through their relationships with other neighborhoods. Therefore, as Kearns and Parkinson (2001) note, neighbourhoods are part of larger social and economic worlds, and function as reservoirs of resources for people to dip into in everyday life. In the Indian context, studies on neighborhoods have often overlooked the nuanced social dynamics within them. Janaki Abraham (2018) critiques social anthropology's focus on sociality in the neighbourhood as a prima facie fact of social life, arguing for more attention to neighborhood cultures in influencing access to space, social expression and aspiration. In the context of the control imposed by neighbourhoods, Abraham in 'What will the neighbours say?' (2016) looks at people's strategies of seeking legitimacy within them. Given its proximity to the university campus, Yeshu Nagar as a neighbourhood has also been impacted by the student population inhabiting it. To understand this process, we looked at the concept of 'studentification' given by Darren P. Smith (2005) through which he explores the transformation of neighbourhoods with the growing predominance of a student population in them. Neighbourhoods such as Yeshu Nagar become shaping spaces for these students, not just temporary areas of stay in a new city.

As Yeshu Nagar's broader city context, Delhi is marked by a high degree of urban informality. According to the Center for Policy Research (2015), only 23.7% of the

population resides in planned colonies, with most residing in unauthorized colonies like Yeshu Nagar. This directed our research towards literature on informality, starting with Ananya Roy's work, 'Urban Informality: Towards an Epistemology of Planning' (2005). Roy (2005) argues that informality operates as an "organising logic" in especially developing countries, creating informal spaces as a "state of exception" created by the State itself where different actors may have different relations to questions of power and exclusion (pp. 148, 155). Gautam Bhan's 'In the Public Interest' (2016) also looks at how such informal settlements often emerge as responses to the state's failure to provide viable housing. When the State perceives these neighbourhoods as problematic, one sees strategies like relocations, demolitions and 'regularisation' drives. Bhan (2013) also complicates this idea of illegality, showing the diverse experiences of informality among different urban actors.

METHODOLOGY

We adopted a qualitative methodology, consisting of ethnographic fieldwork for roughly three weeks during June and July. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 73 people. Given the contested character of the neighbourhood, we have opted to use pseudonyms for places, organisations and people. Of our total sample, eight individuals were long-term Christian residents who owned property in the neighbourhood and had been living there since the beginning- with one person being a former resident who still owned and managed a building. Although we could not speak to all original Christian families still living in the neighbourhood, a reliable estimate from the field places their numbers around 10-12 families. Fourteen people were Hindu and Muslim long-term owner-residents. Among the population on rent, eleven were students (four in university and seven preparing for competitive exams), four were living on rent but did not depend on Yeshu Nagar for their livelihood, while fourteen were living on rent in the colony and working there in commercial enterprises like eateries and shops. Another fourteen respondents did not live in Yeshu Nagar, but worked as service providers within the neighbourhood. In our pursuit of a holistic picture, we also visited the neighbouring localities of Macaulay Lines and Yoddha Nagar briefly, getting six interviews from residents and commercial establishments. Lastly, we also had multiple conversations with the GPC- the organisation in charge of the cemetery in Yeshu Nagar.

Most of our respondents across all categories- except the long-term Christian owner-residents- were Hindu or Muslim. Men were also a significant portion of our sample- with 49 interviews, while we could interview only 23 women. We acknowledge this limitation, but it is worth mentioning that most Christian residents in the sample were women. Respondents also belonged to varying age groups- with long-term owner-residents tending towards their 60s or above. The migrant population was similarly diverse- students were in their 20s while young and middle-aged workers were in our sample. We kept a field diary to note our daily participant observations beyond relying on interview data. Furthermore, an essential part of our research involves archival work, for which we approached the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) for information and photos related to the neighbourhood. We also used online records to access official land deeds, old news articles, and other government files related to Yeshu Nagar.
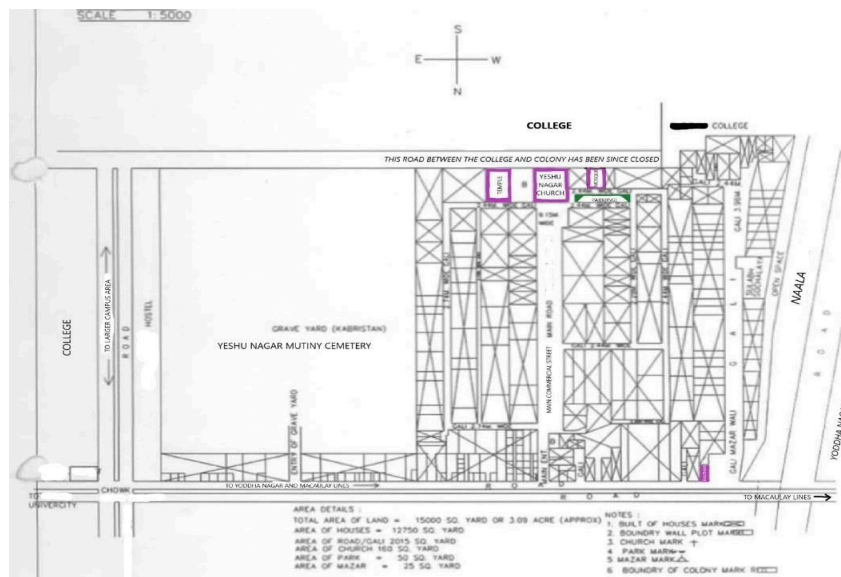
THE FIELD

Image: Official Layout Map of Yeshu Nagar made by the company commissioned during the neighbourhood RWA's bid for regularisation c. 2007

During the early mornings in June and July when we reached the field, life in the neighbourhood was only beginning. While fruit and vegetable vendors, tea stalls and grocery shops began their business around 9 AM, the rest of the road and neighbourhood were largely silent, with the photocopy, book and stationary shops the area is famous for remaining closed. These photocopy and stationary shops serve as a site for students and research scholars enrolled in the university to meet and sustain an academic community. One was also hit by the smell of the *naala* (broad drain) on the neighborhood's boundaries, beyond which one would find a trendy student recreation and food hub in the campus area, historically known to house barracks in the colonial days and refugees from Pakistan post-independence. Today, this area we have named Macaulay Lines also offers university student accommodation at expensive rates. Bordering the naala on the side of Yeshu Nagar was a slightly spatially aloof part of the larger neighbourhood popularly called '*mazhar wali gali'*, after the *mazhar* structure near its entry. Right across the main road was the local police station and university staff flats, in front of which there were several eateries part of the MCD's *Tehbazari* scheme.

During our initial days, we tried to paint a mental image of the gate that led into the colony. While there was a black grill metal gate that one would encounter first, it did not pique interest, although the signboard of a right-wing student organisation that had its office inside

the neighbourhood was perched on it. The gate really in question was a 19th-century coral-coloured brick arch, today adorned with various rent and event posters. We noticed during preliminary visits that a blue ASI-protected monument board was placed near the gate- given that the land on which the neighbourhood exists today was a currently ASI-protected, pre-Independence British-era cemetery, but it was removed since we started our fieldwork properly. Today this gate, along with the part of the old cemetery that still exists, is shaped into an important landmark held dear by long-term residents and dictating the rhythms of life in Yeshu Nagar- as one of our Christian respondents who had been living in the colony for thirty years noted.

Image: The coral gate to the cemetery/initial settlement in the 1980s-

Sourced from the ASI

A somewhat broad alley from this gate led us to an unassuming church building at the opposite end of the colony. Both sides of the street were lined by several grocery stores, tea stalls, small restaurants and *dhabas* catering to the everyday needs of residents and occasional visitors. This particular street was marked by shifting temporal forms- it was lined up with garbage collecting carts in the morning, and during the afternoon and early evening, it became a play area for children in the colony. From late evening, it transformed into a lively place with tea stalls open till late at night with visitors from other neighbourhoods contributing to the crowd. However, we must add that our fieldwork was conducted during summer vacations, so we could not fully capture the hubbub of the neighbourhood and the main street outside its walls since the number of students had reduced, though by no means insignificant.

Image: snapshots from the field- (L-R): main street, an inner lane, inside the current cemetery

The main street of Yeshu Nagar somewhat divided the neighbourhood into two blocks A and B, approachable through narrow alleys. While building layouts were not different, the social landscape of the blocks held some differences. While Block A- on the right side of the church had a mosque (one among the very few mosques in the vicinity of the campus), Block B on the left had a temple. This is not to suggest that the demographic distribution of the residents follows religious lines- different communities lived together with no specific communal clustering. Interestingly, however, both the mosque and the temple shared a similar unassuming character at first glance- if the temple's gates were closed, one could mistake it to be entirely a residential building. In Block A, there was a small open area in front of the mosque that we called 'park(ing)' during fieldwork for ease of our understanding, since while the area was demarcated in colony layouts as a park recreational space, it was being used as a parking space for two-wheeler vehicles. Given the general compactness of Yeshu Nagar, it is perhaps not surprising that the only earmarked recreational area was also repurposed to maximise the utility of all available spaces.

Apart from its looming 4-5 storey high buildings with narrow stairways leading up, a characteristic feature of the neighborhood's visual impact was the mesh of overhead wires on every lane. This mesh often impeded sunlight as the inner lanes remained dimly lit even during broad daylight. Sometimes in the mid-mornings, we followed a middle-aged man on his cycle selling breakfast/ *nashta* at low prices to the neighborhood students. But it was almost always male students who emerged from the buildings for a meal. We found the use of public spaces in the neighbourhood gendered- as one resident remarked, it was the "*hisaab*" or implicit rule of the neighbourhood that girl students did not live here.

SOCIAL HISTORY

Beginnings- the cemetery and initial squatting

Image: Cemetery painting from 1944- sourced from Spring 2011 BACSA Journal 'Chowkidar'

Image: old monument structure in the 1980s- (note the coming up of jhopris behind it)- sourced from ASI

The history of the cemetery on which Yeshu Nagar was built dates back to the Siege of Delhi during the First War of Independence of 1857. Originally built in the 1830s to accommodate a growing European population in colonial Delhi, the cemetery came to be known from 1857 as the resting place for martyred British soldiers. Originally under the aegis of the European Cemeteries Committee, the care of Mutiny cemetery was handed over to the GPC shortly after independence. The GPC informed us that the cemetery closed for burials in 1910, and the part that has been "encroached" today was the European side of the cemetery, while the Indian side still stands in a limited sense. The 1970s were the decade that saw the beginnings of Yeshu Nagar (and in GPC parlance, the beginning of 'encroachments'), as well as the slow growth of the campus space nearby. Although the establishment year of the colony is roughly put around 1978-79 (and in some stories, 1974), the cemetery area already had the Church on it around 1971-1972.

One of popular narratives from long-term owner-residents is that settlements began with the late Reverend starting the church and settling poor Christian families on the nearby land, following which he distributed empty plots to these families for a *parchi*/receipt (either free of cost or for 100-150 rupees). Another narrative, however, placed the early families on the main road outside the then-existing walls of the cemetery- who were also displaced once or

twice but later returned around 1978-79 inside the cemetery lands once the gate lock was broken. At the same time, alternative stories exist- for the young Mr. Saadiq, who manages an online services shop alongside multiple properties leased to people, three Muslim families first settled in Yeshu Nagar- noting that the religiously-inclined naming of the neighbourhood happened much later.

Image: The beginnings of the Church- sourced from the current pastor.

Image: The cemetery in the early 1980s- sourced from the ASI

The story behind what happened to the old graves also has various versions. On one hand, some older Christian families confessed to seeing the old graves growing up and having had their homes built on top of them. Others, however, deny any involvement- for instance, the current pastor's sister Angelina, who recalled playing hide and seek among the old graves in her childhood, said that goons (*goondey)* who later moved to Yeshu Nagar actually broke the graves down. There is also an implicit tendency to skim over the existence of the cemetery altogether- Mrs. Priya, who had settled in the very beginning with her sister, said that there used to be no graves in the colony at all, even when her husband (who settled later) emphasised upon it.

In most stories received from Christian families, it was usually abject poverty that drove people to Yeshu Nagar in the early days. According to Ms. Valentina, who has a five-storey property on the main road where she lives with her aged mother, her family could not make ends meet with the burden of rent payments in Ashram that persuaded their move to Yeshu Nagar, where they started their home with a small thatched hut (*jhopri)*. It was through intense struggle- including dealing with her father's alcoholism, her inability to get an education, and later legal and familial fights to retain her property- that she was able to

rebuild her house 8 times. Most elderly Christian women who have been here since the start emphasise their resilience in staying in Yeshu Nagar for multiple decades despite all odds.

Image: a slate making unit during the initial years of the settlement (c. 80s)

Sourced from the ASI

The initial days of settlement were met with no basic amenities- meaning that residents had to walk far to get water, use tin lamps within flammable thatched huts (Angelina's documents were burned in one such fire), and the like. Most of the colony's population was either involved in factory work or were daily service providers like house maids, helpers and labourers. In the absence of resources, many of the older Christian women worked multiple jobs to feed and educate their children. Religious faith features prominently as a source of strength for the older residents to get through all troubles- as Mrs. Christina put it, "*jungle se Yeshu ne mangal kar diya"* (Jesus has transformed this into goodness from a jungle). This familiarity with Jesus/God in kinship terms has also been spelled out in Abhijit Dasgupta's fieldwork in a Christian neighbourhood in Kolkata where Christ emerged as "someone as familiar as one's father" to support and guide one through life's difficulties (2024, p. 301). In an environment where their claims to Yeshu Nagar have been repeatedly legally challenged, the cemetery itself has also transformed into one potential source of justification. Mrs. Christina, who had heard of and encountered the ghosts of the British soldiers buried in the cemetery, believes that as long as she keeps them in her prayers, these spirits would take care of her since she was also a Christian like them.

Slow development of amenities

From the mid-1980s, residents started demanding proper water and electricity connections. Ms. Priya told us how she and a few other residents used to visit the then BJP MLA Mahendra Gupta's office nearby to plead for these basic amenities- their combined efforts bringing water and electricity lines into the colony. Once these amenities were in place, the residents of Yeshu Nagar started building *pakke makaan* (built constructions). Even the church's structure was made somewhat concrete via the contribution made by the residents in terms of money and labour. When civic amenities were set up in the colony, the issue of electricity bills in the names of residents was seen as a positive state intervention, as people's residences were at least partially recognised under the purview of the State. However, others perceived it as the beginning of commercialisation- motivated by political interests according to the pastor- which eventually drove older Christian residents out of the colony.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, Yeshu Nagar witnessed a transformation in its built environment and demography. Many of the Christian residents now started moving out of the neighbourhood. While Mrs Christina argued that the older residents left the colony because of the fear that it was built on graves, Ms Joshi said that since most of the residents had daughters, they had to leave the colony because the *mahaul* (atmosphere) was not suitable for the latter. In sum, Christian residents seemed to have left after selling their lands off to non-Christians coming in because they needed money and/or were fearful of demolitions. The non-Christians in question were businessmen (*baniyas,* as cited by one of our respondents) and government officers who saw land in Yeshu Nagar as an investment.

These events were happening simultaneously to larger changes in campus spaces of central universities leading up to and following economic liberalisation in the 1990s. DU, in particular, grew by leaps and bounds in terms of its academic-infrastructural capacity and student intake since the mid-1980s. The late 80s and the 90s saw numerous constituent colleges and departments coming- many oriented towards professional education (DU website, n.d.). However, the rapid expansion of student intake did not go hand in hand with the provision of proportionate affordable institutional student housing. This growing demand for student accommodation provided *netas* (politicians) and *afsars* (officers) in campus neighbourhoods like Yeshu Nagar with an opportunity to build purpose-built student accommodation as a source of rental income. Mrs Priya, a local resident, and Rajesh, a shopkeeper, said Mahendra Gupta was one of the first politicians who showed interest in the

colony and eventually bought the land where he built such housing. One of his buildings is a hostel for students and the office of the right-wing student organisation.

Junaid Khan, a resident from Yoddha Nagar who manages the mazhaar (shrine), also mentioned how another Congress politician Mahesh Loosler was also interested in the neighbourhood. Loosler wanted a bus depot for students in place of settlements. However, residents opposed such an intervention which would have led to the colony's demolition. Yeshu Nagar went from being a neighbourhood that was once predominantly occupied by Christians to a commercial hub providing accommodation to students, thereby making the space diverse in terms of religion, ethnicities and cultures. The influx of student population, therefore, resulted in the 'studentification' of many neighbourhoods around the Delhi University campus, with multi-storied buildings with several rooms on each floor with rents ranging from ₹500 to ₹1000 in Yeshu Nagar (Smith, 2005). However, the unauthorised status of the colony seems to have slowed the pace of constructions for a while- as many people noted, it is only in the last 7-8 years that tensions about demolitions have abated and the stature of buildings in the neighbourhood have taken new heights.

Tensions, Conflicts and Accommodations with the State

The story of Yeshu Nagar continues after its studentification began in the 90s. Although amenities were put in place and students moved into the area in large numbers, the status of an authorised residential colony has continued to evade Yeshu Nagar- its status remaining ambiguous even when colonies around the area were getting regularised over time. Nestled in the heart of DU's north campus, the neighbourhood accrued tremendous real estate potential over the decades- transforming it into a prime property location. Over the years, large parts of Yeshu Nagar were converted into commercial and rental real estate housing. However, the remains of the 18th-century cemetery continued to haunt the residents as a small patch of history that gave the State a special claim to the colony. The ASI would frequent, every few years there was talk of demolitions- as Junaid Khan told us, "in the late 90s the bulldozers were almost at the gate, it was only after a prominent politician from Delhi got involved that they were put on hold".

The status of the colony has been in a constant state of flux, and while the residents have made multiple attempts to secure a claim, the colony was never regularised. One such attempt

was in 2007 when the colony's Resident Welfare Association commissioning a company to make layout plans of the neighbourhood and filing for regularisation with the government, claiming that the colony was not on protected lands (MCD application for regularisation by RWA, 2007).[1] However, the RWA was rushed off as largely a failed attempt by most residents. In 2014, ASI records did not identify Yeshu Nagar as eligible for regularisation, restating that the cemetery was a protected monument. Around 7-8 years ago, the GPC also told us how they had filed a writ petition with the High Court regarding the encroachments. Therefore, the threat of demolition always loomed large-prompting moves. Mr Ali, one of the old residents who sold off his land in the early 2000s, still sets his shop by the main gate. Where his house once stood, today there is a 5-storey building that generates lakhs in rental income.

As the current pastor told us, there were other factors involved in the process of residents moving out- "yes, many of them left out of fear, but the *baniyas* were clever. We *isai* people are not good with money, but the *baniyas* knew the ins and the outs of the matter; they knew there would be no demolition". Social actors who had a proximity to the State or were privy to inside information about the neighbourhood leveraged their comparative advantage to 'buy' property at low prices parallel to the departure of many original less well-off Christian residents fearing demolition or in need of money. But these agents largely only capitalised on the real estate they owned by leasing it rather than substantively consuming it through residence. In contrast, most of these original families' squatted' here for living in the absence of economic capital at that point of their lives. The colony has only attained a semi-legal status in recent years. Some of the buildings have been regularised under the PM UDAY mission (a central government scheme for facilitating regularisation of unauthorised colonies in Delhi by handing over official ownership rights to residents), for which government land records as late as 2022 are available online. But it lay in a state of suspension for the longest time- although this technical illegality never stopped its rapid expansion. But what was illegal was also uncertain- most of our respondents recall how there was no security, holding a 'parchi' or having access to a sale deed was no protection when the colony itself was deemed illegal. However, interestingly, new actors like a set of high-level influential bureaucrats became 'owners' in the neighbourhood despite its official illegality by the early 2000s.

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[1] https://udd.delhi.gov.in/node/58509

EVERYDAY LIFE IN YESHU NAGAR

Life in Yeshu Nagar is dynamic and busy throughout the day, even during university vacation time, as our fieldwork showed us. Over three weeks, we identified a set of aspects regarding the neighbourhood's everyday culture that we explore in this section.

Commercial Life

The difference in Yeshu Nagar's public life between the day and night is one of the first things one may notice in the neighbourhood, influenced by its vibrant commercial life. While the main street appears to be the hub for business, numerous eateries, grocery shops, tea stalls, and salons thrive in the inner lanes as well. Certain establishments, like the two tea stalls near the gate, operate throughout the night and often attract more customers- from other areas too- after dark. However, this night market generates mixed responses- while for long-term residents, it is a source of disturbance; for students, it allows them to study till 1 am at the library without worrying about the availability of food.

It must be noted in reference to literature on 'studentification' that within studentified neighbourhoods, there is a reconfiguration of local establishments like shops and other services to suit student demands (Smith, 2005). As the tea-seller Abhay humorously remarked one boils along with the tea in the summers, these same tea stalls and photocopy shops serve as important sites for recreation and interaction in Yeshu Nagar. The presence of students also makes the neighbourhood important during student union elections- another tea-seller noted how a win or loss was decided there ("*yahin se haar jeet hoti hain*"). Mess owners from Uttarakhand and Manipur maintain good relationships with these students, sharing a bond that was made and maintained over routine conversations.

A significant proportion of the tea-stalls inside the neighbourhood were owned by people from the same village in Bihar, showing how kinship ties and village networks impact the neighborhood's commercial landscape. These connections help bring in people from states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to Yeshu Nagar in search of jobs or pursuit of educational aspirations. Furthermore, the presence of numerous momo "factories" highlights the presence of a significant Nepali migrant population in the neighbourhood, according to residents. The commerce that takes place in Yeshu Nagar is also primarily for daily consumption, with

popular items being milk, biscuits, and other low-cost essentials in the smallest commercially available packages and mostly priced below 20 rupees. A local shopkeeper captured the essence of commercial life in the neighbourhood: "*students hai to Yeshu Nagar hai*" (Yeshu Nagar exists because of students).

Student Presence and 'mahaul'

As life gets busy during the day, young boys can be seen jotting up staircases with canisters of filtered drinking water to deliver them to student residents. Ajit is one of the water suppliers in the colony- he laments that business is slow, moreover margins are thin in his business. Most of his customers opt for the 20 rupee can, the cheapest in the market. Ajit offers Bisleri canisters that sell for a hundred rupees, but he has no takers- "When the colony was bustling with *taiyari karne waale ladke* (UPSC aspirants), business was good. But now I see no future in this business". The fall in the number of "serious" students in the neighbourhood was a common narrative- while once an atmosphere of studiousness ("*parhai wala mahaul*") prevailed, in the recent decade students have given way to a significant number of both "*aiyashi- wale*" students as well as labouring families. Mukesh, a middle-aged man who has been running a grocery shop on lease for decades, remarked how once upon a time Yeshu Nagar produced several UPSC toppers- but the feeling of having lost this prevailed over similar conversations that we had with others. The growing presence of labourers was also a prominent complaint for many long-term residents- shop owners in the neighbourhood were much more frank about their general unease with migrant workers living in Yeshu Nagar, feeling that it took away from the previous "studentified" character of the neighbourhood in important ways.

However, others like the Christian resident Mrs. Priya, who rents out floors in her buildings to male students, speaks of how her current tenants are good and calm, noting days in the 2010s when tensions with predominantly Bihari students studying law were high among property-owners in the neighbourhood. In this period, numerous students refused to vacate their rooms and defaulted on rent payments, demanding better civic amenities while questioning the unauthorised character of the neighbourhood. Around the same time, a PIL was filed by a former DU student in 2015, challenging the constructions in the neighbourhood given its label as an unauthorised colony in light of owners threatening student residents with lack of basic amenities and eviction (Business Standard, 2015 May

05). The owner-residents perceived this as an attempt by these students to usurp ownership over their buildings by occupation or "*kabza*". Mrs. Priya noted how it was a struggle to get these students to leave, but speaks of general amiability with the students currently living in the colony, especially those from the North-Eastern states. It was an unspoken strategy adopted by owners to increase diversity of students living on rent in the neighbourhood, reduce intake of students from Bihar and Haryana, and ensure that tenants in general from the same region did not concentrate in the same building or stayed on lease for long durations.

Built Environment and Neighbourhood Culture

Yeshu Nagar stands out among surrounding neighborhoods, such as Yoddha Nagar which charge significantly higher rents. It is one of the few areas where students can find accommodation for under 5,000 rupees. The buildings in Yeshu Nagar are closely packed, characterized by tiny rooms with minimal open spaces. Residents often describe these cramped conditions with phrases like "dum ghunttah hei andar" (we feel suffocated inside) and "agar aag lagi toh fire brigade bhi nahi ghus sakti" (the fire brigade cannot enter) illustrating their discomfort. Students frequently prefer to spend time outside their rooms, rather than in the constricting confines of their rooms.

Nand Kishore, a student in Yeshu Nagar, pointed out that life in the neighbourhood reflects "sangharsh" (struggle) and perseverance, stating, "you will find struggle wherever you look." Tanzeel, who moved from Nepal for better coaching opportunities, also stressed on the amount of pressure and isolation students feel in Yeshu Nagar, making indications at student suicides- something that others also spoke of. While students attributed such cases to financial burden, the residents were more inclined towards citing romantic issues as the underlying problems.
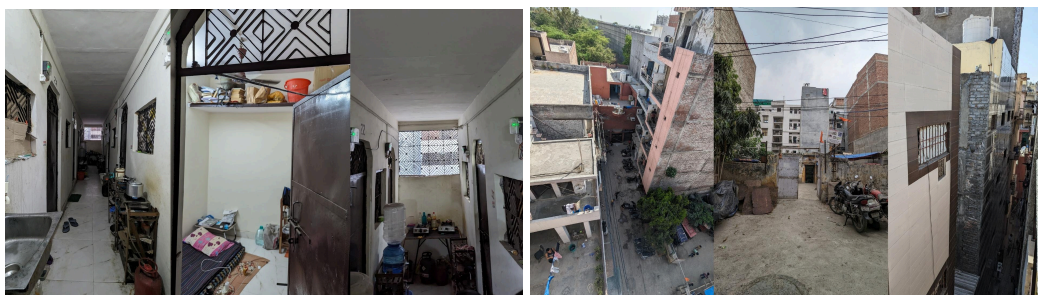
Images: (L-R) snapshots from inside the student accommodations, snapshots from the streets

The built environment of Yeshu Nagar creates a hyper-individualized lifestyle, as the lack of public spaces inhibits social interaction. This isolation runs parallel with the relationships students form with service providers, such as the local "istri wali dadi" (iron-wali grandmother), who becomes a rare source of connection and support. The nature of student housing—marked by informality and lack of legal agreements—affects not only living conditions but also students' overall lifestyles and cultures (Smith & Hubbard, 2014).

Most students view their rooms as disposable, functional spaces that serve a temporary purpose rather than as homes with personal significance. These "non-places" create a sense of anonymity and replaceability (Augé, 1995). Many students are hesitant to bring family or friends to their rooms. Yeshu Nagar therefore emerges as not the desirable but only the most affordable option for many students who come to Delhi to study. This environment creates anxiety among residents, particularly in contrast to nostalgia for a more vibrant student community in the past. Yeshu Nagar can be seen as an "anxious place," where physical spaces once imbued with social meaning have become sources of discomfort and uncertainty due to modern pressures (Augé, 1995). This experience marks a dual anxiety between not belonging versus belonging to the wrong kind of place. Thus, while the rooms may hold little significance, the overall environment contributes to feelings of unease and isolation, shaping the daily lives of its student residents.

SITUATING YESHU NAGAR WITHIN INFORMALITY

In the context of a state vision of transforming Delhi into a World Class City under MPD 2021, the force of urbanisation in the city through the exercise of sovereign power is often violent towards the lowest strata that inhabit the spaces of the national capital (Ong & Roy, 2011, p. 259). The ideal of the planned city is such that it gives primacy to the principles that the State and its planners hold, often within a larger nexus with capital- as Henri Lefebvre (1996) noted, the advent of the 'bourgeois period' and development of the capitalist city marked the entry of a 'class strategy' into the understanding and division of urban reality and projections on the society of the city (pp. 14-15). What is sidelined is what Gautam Bhan (2018) calls the 'self-planned' or 'auto-constructed' character of cities like Delhi.

When one speaks of the social history of Delhi, the conversation cannot stop at the plans that those in power have variously thought of and executed. What we call 'informality' today in administrative-legal as well as social-scientific language must be looked at in terms of its creation by the State- and here one may specifically look towards the independent Indian State- as a 'state of exception' where the State and its agents may variably enforce its sovereignty depending on changing contexts (Ong & Roy, 2011). A neighbourhood labelled as informal, 'unauthorised' and ineligible for 'regularisation' in official records does carry that label on ground in the minds of people who inhabit that space and those who try to comprehend it. We see it in the various narratives among the residents of Yeshu Nagar who spoke of the departure of their Christian neighbours- those who first made claims to that space- due to the threat of demolition in a context where official informality of the neighbourhood made life insecure. The tensions that come with the contested nature of the neighbourhood become stark at moments of verbal and/or physical disagreements and altercations. One such incident from the field was the episode with Bihari students in the 2010s as already discussed before.

But informality in the colony does not operate in this straightforward manner alone. Contending with informality is part of the narratives of older Christian residents who couch their resilience in staying in the neighbourhood for decades within an idiom of religious faith. In these stories, their father-like Jesus guided them through life struggles, including attempts by various state agents to uproot them from the neighbourhood as well as more well-to-do residents from nearby areas who tried to use violence when they stood up for their right to the

neighbourhood spaces. It is also part of the pride felt by more middle-aged respondents who speak of their ability to circumvent demolition attempts by state agencies like the police, MCD and ASI through various extra-legal strategies out of sheer wit, despite being *'angootha chhaap'* (illiterate). Dealing with informality is, in many ways, everyday for the residents and shopkeepers of Yeshu Nagar, for whom claiming the right to the neighbourhood is based on years of inhabiting it despite there being a cemetery, rather than state-sanctioned land-use plans (Purcell, 2013).

In existing literature on student housing, Kinton et al. (2018) and Holton and Riley (2013) noted the coming up of Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) to cater to student housing demands, transforming spaces in the vicinity of campus areas in specific ways. Since students are the key consumers in this market, the provider of services must cater to their needs in order to survive. The accommodation providers are compelled to ensure that they supply their customers (students) with maximum possible facilities, or decrease their rent if they fail to do so. The goal of providing a sense of home or comfort in these accommodations leads to a tendency of circumscribing access to certain kinds of housing due to lack of affordability of high rents- in turn creating expensive, exclusive 'gated student enclaves' (Smith and Hubbard, 2014).

The spatialities thereby created in the process of socially setting student-dominated neighbourhoods apart in terms of quality and cost of PBSAs have a strong social impact on how student residents experience their lives in that space (Kinton et al., 2018). In this process of studentification of neighbourhoods like Yeshu Nagar or Yoddha Nagar, access to leisure and recreational consumption in the public arena becomes relatively restricted to students with access to the economic capital to afford housing in specific areas (He, 2015). With a new space emerging for neo-liberal consumer market forms, places such as Yoddha Nagar have transformed into spaces of class consumerism with cafes, brand outlets and fast fashion stores catering to a student base with the capital to afford it. These commercial spaces often serve as a way to distinguish oneself by one's 'taste' or 'choice'. With these commercial establishments proliferating from the 2000s in the campus area, existing businesses as well as vacant spaces have become modelled to fit into this novel market form. This in turn creates a new more alluring form of urbanism that captures the imagination of a new consumer base.

As Harvey (2012, p. 14) writes:

"Even the incoherent, bland, and monotonous suburban tract development that continues to dominate in many areas, now gets its antidote in a "new urbanism" movement that touts a world in which the neoliberal ethic of intense possessive individualism can become the template for human personality socialisation".

As these spaces get transformed adhering to the logic of this economy, a spatial transformation dictated by enterprises for class-consumption ensues, providing sociability predicated on the condition that one can pay for it. In light of this, what Yeshu Nagar shows us is a kind of a studentified neighbourhood where things run on informalities of tenure and basic facilities in a trade-off with low rents. The housing situation- lacking lease agreements or sense of security- is extremely precarious for student-residents, for whom the neighbourhood emerges as simply a place to reside and study in, bereft of recreation opportunities. This informality also lends itself to the neighbourhood's thriving night market which remains busy with a student crowd even when all shops close down following police orders in the nearby areas. This market- dominated by tea stalls, low-price food stalls and *paan* shops- operates in a very informal agreement with the adjacent police station who do not intervene in exchange for a certain amount of money every week or month.

However, the 'commercialisation' process that Yeshu Nagar is said to have gone through in the hands of non-Christian agents who entered the space later has come with changes in its built environment with a marked impact on how the middle-aged Christian residents feel about the space they inhabit. While they speak of fondness of the days of their childhood in Yeshu Nagar, they express distaste for the way the neighbourhood has become more congested and unsafe- noting that the 'mahaul' of the neighbourhood is no longer liveable ('*rehne layak*'). Some of the older residents also desired to move somewhere else. These families must be seen as at least economically upwardly mobile given the scale of property they own within the neighbourhood and how they lease it out. The current built environment of the neighbourhood- connected intimately to perceptions of its socio-cultural atmosphere- may today contradict the aspirations of these Christian families who may imagine their ideal neighbourhood to look different.

What must be further investigated is how the State deals with the nature of different kinds of Unauthorised Colonies, since it has a separate label for "unauthorised colonies inhabited by

the affluent section of society" like Chattarpur (PM UDAY cell, DDA website). While a comparison of these neighbourhoods was beyond our immediate scope, it is still interesting to note how residents of these affluent UCs took to the streets in February 2024 to ask for ownership rights over their properties promised to them during elections- since their ownership was taken out of the purview of PM UDAY (The Print, 2024). But land records do note a few cases of regularisation in the case of Yeshu Nagar- but these must also be seen in terms of an actual "spectrum" of property rights on ground wherein protection from eviction is the beginning and full ownership is only the end (Bhan, 2018). While several of the DDA PM UDAY land deeds for Yeshu Nagar are registered as conveyance deeds, the continuing unauthorised character of the larger neighbourhood itself can put this ownership to question.

In this context of deep tensions of informality, arguments around legitimacy are diverse. However, one must look at these claims within a 'property rights regime' (Purcell, 2013, p. 149). Building upon Purcell's commentary of Henri Lefebvre's 'right to the city' (2013), property rights are a big player when it comes to claims to the space of the city- and this follows for Yeshu Nagar too. The entire question of informality has to do with whether the residents of Yeshu Nagar have the right to officially and legally own property in that space, given its history as cemetery lands and therefore land earmarked for a different kind of use by the State. Therefore, for the GPC, the residents of Yeshu Nagar are 'encroachers', personifying illegality and thereby being unworthy of rights within the sovereign model of the State (Bhan, 2016, pp. 28-29). When it comes to narratives of legitimacy from within, the language borrows implicitly or explicitly from the framework of legitimacy of property ownership. While some stressed on their right to property within the legal language of having 'power of attorney', others saw the 'parchi' received in the beginning days of the colony as a legitimate mark of property ownership. The predominance of property rights are also visible in how the needs of property owners have fundamentally transformed the neighbourhood's landscape- the stature of the buildings emerging with the growth of PBSAs, and still changing with most buildings operating as mostly informal 'mixed -use' units. Yeshu Nagar can then be seen as a neighbourhood in flux, its character dynamic and influenced heavily by its official informality.

CONCLUSION

The study of a neighbourhood like Yeshu Nagar offers us a detailed lens to understand contentious questions of informality, illegality and conflicting claims of legitimacy over place especially in cities like Delhi. Informality is a significant element shaping Yeshu Nagar's culture in specific ways- our main argument being that it has been a primary player behind the kind of studentification the neighbourhood has experienced. Even as informality shapes life, it is also shaped by the various strategies employed by people in the neighbourhood to deal with it. Access to economic and social capital- money and networks that bring one close to state power and information- is a major factor in the historical development of the neighbourhood. While kinship or regional networks act as an important factor in how groups like students come to cities like Delhi, one's social class must be seen as a primary element that determines which space one gets to occupy and access when they enter the city.

The low economic capital possessed by most students and migrant workers living in Yeshu Nagar may thereby have relegated them to such an informal neighbourhood, apart from other social relationships made by these migrant-residents themselves once they have moved to the city. Yeshu Nagar is a space that may be seen as strategically chosen also to access these networks created around the university. The neighbourhood's informality still necessitates certain strategies of affiliation to contend with its tensions- strategies that can be seen as having class characters and leading to variable realisations of a feeling of 'locality' (Appadurai, 1996). For students who come from lower-class backgrounds, the colony is simply a place to reside where the room for making meanings is heavily limited. On the other hand, for older owner-residents owning and profiting off of real estate in Yeshu Nagar, their strategies for contending with neighbourhood' problems' are diverse- with some associating with their religious community but not with the neighbourhood at large, or expressing belonging towards a nostalgic neighbourhood past while expressing distaste for its present State. Our study therefore attempts to offer a picture of a neighbourhood in a campus space as a microcosm for understanding how state action as well as inaction produces distinct spaces. Places of exception need to be understood in such contexts as a suspension of formal authority- with the kind of power operational in these spaces being informal, contested, and a type that, although not always linked to the State, nonetheless works in tandem with it.

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