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In Pune's Skies, Parrots are a Sign of How Caste Shapes Cities

By: Shailaja Paik

The historical allocation of land and who inherits it dictates why some neighbourhoods have birds, tree-lined avenues and far better civic amenities.

On a winter morning in Pune's Erandwane-Karve Nagar, I was startled awake by the piercing call of a cuckoo. It was my first morning at a friend's place and the cuckoo's calling rang out clearly in the silent neighbourhood. I was shocked.

In the Pune in which I grew up, one could hear the mornings well before the sun rose: women bustling to the public water taps to fill their steel and brass pots; the clattering of women washing utensils; women and men rushing to line up at the public toilets.

Over the years, there have been competing sounds: vehicles honking, vendors calling, water tankers rumbling in narrow lanes, the growl of idle engines, men revving their motorcycles and scooters to warm up the engines, school buses honking to alert parents and children, stray dogs barking.

But when I stepped into the balcony of my friend's home, a cup of tea in hand, the street and adjoining park were silent. Coconut palms and mango trees rose above compound walls. Sunlight fell gently across tiled roofs and roof tops, shining into the kitchen through wall-size, eastern mesh-covered windows. It felt heavenly.

Then there was a shrieking in the skies with a flash of green: parrots, bright green, flying in the morning light. One swung from a vine, its claws gripping thin twigs while another cackled and darted away as an eagle swooped by. They belonged. I had not known parrots lived like this in Pune. At least, they did not in the Pune I lived in.

Two cities in one

I grew up in Yerawada, a locality once on the eastern fringes of the city which has now expanded far beyond it. My childhood memories are thick with loud arguments, stray dogs and pigs, garbage fermenting near the public toilet and everyone rushing to get to work - cooking, cleaning, sweeping the streets, daily-wage labour, offices and hospitals, laundry, and managing small stores that were an extension of the home, a curtain dividing the two.

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Greenery was sparse, like the sole banyan tree on a parapet where men hung out, played cards, or chatted and there were no parks within walking distance. The skyline was cut by electric wires and wooden poles.

I was familiar with crows and sparrows. Parrots lived only in cages, trained to repeat phrases adults taught them. Elders would chant, laughing, "Mitthu pappi de, pappi de." Why did they want the parrot to kiss them? It never occurred to me that parrots needed tall trees or quiet streets and stretches of air to survive. There was none in Yerawada.

The Erandwane neighborhood where I spent three days felt like a different city. Even the name, Erandwane, is important: it means a forest of castor plants. Streets and houses are laid out in a grid. Bungalows lie behind gates. Some of these bungalows have been replaced by five-storey apartments but the trees stand tall - coconut, mango, neem - older than the redevelopment that surrounds them. Bougainvillea and other flowery vines and ornamental trees spill over the compound walls.

Outside housing societies are the surnames of residents: Sane, Oak, Deshpande, Joshi, Bapat, Sahasrabuddhe, Pendharkar, Talpade, Tambe. These names appear across Pune's older, established localities, educational institutions and professional networks, signalling how land, property and power are inherited.

Residents also advertise their small businesses and accomplishments as lawyers, doctors, architects. Well-fed dogs - pedigree breeds like dobermans - pace the compounds. At the entrance of each society, a security guard keeps watch, questioning and noting details of

visitors in a register.

The orderliness of the neighborhood is intentional, inherited, acquired, and much more durable than the new architecture.

Each housing society has a park. Some bear signs: "for residents only", even restricting entry to fixed hours. They are thoughtfully equipped with trimmed lawns, walking paths, benches facing inwards, a pond with fish and wooden bridge, an open gym, a play area for children and toilets. The toilets stink, an overpowering smell that was out of place for the otherwise orderly, flowery garden. Big parks, like the Sambhaji Garden in the city's central Deccan Gymkhana area, had such facilities, but it is rare for a neighborhood park.

Urban geographies

Urban geography tells a story that predates IT hubs and gated communities. The greenery, parks and wider roads are a result of how land was historically allocated and who continues to have access and legal claims to it. It reflects how powerfully the high-caste, high class habitus operates, reinforcing social inequality and caste hierarchy in urban Pune.

> Municipal policies certainly play a role but cities are equally shaped by the long shadows of caste, class and capital.

Pune's neighborhoods such as Karve Nagar were developed when land was available in large parcels and high-caste, high-class families, with social capital and institutional power, owned the land. Redevelopment has replaced many bungalows with spacious apartment blocks, but the underlying layout - space, canopy, infrastructure - is intact.

Areas like Yerawada's slum settlements, on the margins of the city, emerged through the necessity to serve the sprawling army and government facilities. The Khadki cantonment and ammunition factory and the centre of the Bombay Sappers regiment occupy a large portion of the area. Close to it are the Yerawada jail premises, and colleges and schools.

Open spaces were never a part of planning because the residents of Yerawada were excluded from the formal vision of urban development and life. Residents lived in the city without ever belonging to it. Open land was claimed for storage, construction, and survival. The landscape was marked by public toilets and open defecation.

Living in the 'next IT hub'

Recently, my family shifted to a new apartment in Charholi, beyond the airport to the city's northern part, an area developers described as Pune's "next IT hub". Here, I encountered yet another version of the city.

Taxi drivers recall visiting the area as children when it was largely farmland. Today, farmland has thinned into rows of concrete blocks. Apartments, clinics, hospitals, supermarkets, laundry shops and gyms appear almost overnight. They gleam of development, with hoardings promising a plush lifestyle as rural Charholi is consumed by the expanse of urbanisation.

But this shine is dulled by garbage heaps along the streets and fallow land of dwindling farms.

In Charholi, buildings are packed tightly, leaving narrow strips of concrete between parked vehicles and compound walls. My family's building is surrounded by parked vehicles. There is a tiny, blue-tiled swimming pool strewn with plastic and other detritus. In the corner is a recreation hall, locked because of some "incident" in the past, which nobody explained.

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Aspirational low-class and low-middle-class residents have occupied the new apartments but there is no regular water supply. Though the builder has installed water filters in every apartment, residents do not trust this filter. As a result, they buy water at grocery stores and kiosks. This is the first time I have bought drinking water in fifty-two years, that is since 1974, when I began to live in Pune and then regularly visit the city. I continue to be stunned.

Water tankers arrive every day, grinding through narrow lanes and apartment gates. Their engines announce scarcity long before dawn. Fine dust from the nearby mall and building construction sites floats in the air, coating all surfaces in our home: the floor, utensils and

even clothes. Sunlight shines into the west-facing balcony briefly, as if by accident. In winter, the flat is cold and dim.

Walking in Charholi means dodging vehicles, dogs, puddles of water left behind by leaking tankers, water dripping from balconies, sewer stench and overflow and leftover food thrown from balconies to feed the stray dogs and cats. Some residents wake up at 5 am to walk before the traffic thickens. Others walk beside fields that will soon be converted into more towers.

Caste, class, capital in urban India

From the balcony in Erandwane, I wondered how many versions of one city coexist without knowing one another. Municipal policies certainly play a role but cities are equally shaped by the long shadows of caste, class and capital.

In Karve Nagar, redevelopment aligns with administrative power to make the locality a preserve of the privileged high-caste, high-class. An inherited advantage is converted into the environmental and infrastructural comfort of wide streets and tree cover, while other localities are relegated to noise, dust and scarcity.

> I was struck by the total absence of parrots in Yerawada and Charholi.

Charholi's contrast with Erandwane shows how land is valued depending on who historically possessed it. Land is carved up, put to full use and walled up. Unlike Erandwane, there are no old compounds nor tree canopies to preserve. New Charholi reinforces the older logic of development where speed and profit eclipse urban ecology and environmental planning.

I was struck by the total absence of parrots in Yerawada and Charholi.

Silence feels normal in Erandwane but improbable in Charholi. Like Yerawada, the noise in Charholi is constant. I hear everything: the drilling and hammering of construction work, heavy traffic, phone conversations, arguments, laughter, abhang/kirtan songs, movie songs, and unbearable, blasting loud music during events.

But more than the silence of Erandwane, it is perhaps the calling of birds that I wish for more.

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