



IN A DIFFICULT PLACE: CHANGE AND PERCEPTIONS OF WELLBEING AMONG THE LOWER MIDDLE CLASS IN WORLD- CLASS DELHI

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ABSTRACT

The discourse of the world-class city perpetuates the exclusion of those unable to meet the material and cultural standards of a modern lifestyle and consumption that it sets. Marginalised populations within the lower middle class experience a deepening sense of the inadequacy of their ‘embodied knowledges’ in meeting the impossible standards of this world-class imaginary which simultaneously fuels resentment against those who have gained visible social and economic mobility in the recent past.. Focusing on a neighbourhood in Delhi, India, this paper demonstrates the continual struggle within lower middle class populations between owning and disowning their own habitat, in their desire to meet their aspiration to fit into the frames world-classness prescribes. The process contributes to a further destabilisation of their sense of their place in the world which has serious consequences for their wellbeing.

Keywords: *Wellbeing, place, lower middle class, world-class city, Delhi*

Introduction

The vision of the ‘World-Class City’ (WCC) has dominated the discourse on urban transformation in the metropolises of India through the last decade. With its referents in cities

of the First World, this image has found currency with sections of the globalising, upwardly mobile new middle class¹ of the country. In the capital city of Delhi, material space, economic possibilities, everyday experience and moral frameworks have undergone dramatic reconfiguration due to the policy and far reaching infrastructural measures spurred by the imaginary of the WCC. This paper is an account of how the lower middle class residents of Dibri², a residential colony in South Delhi, negotiate the gap between the aspiration to belong to the WCC and their material, social and cultural resources, that are shaped by their geographical and social location. On encountering change, Dibri's residents are forced to contend with the inextricable enmeshment of their own identity with their allegedly the inextricable neighbourhood. The younger residents employ strategies to fashion an urbane self, embracing or distancing themselves from Dibri. I demonstrate how in the process, they confront the dilemma of holding on to and relinquishing the comfort of known ways of being, a negotiation that fuels anxiety and has implications for their wellbeing.

Based upon fieldwork in Dibri this paper shows how understandings of wellbeing among its lower middle class are a product of this continual negotiation with the contradictory impulses of becoming "World-Class" and belonging to a place in contemporary urban India. In doing so this paper flags the centrality of 'place' as a register through which wellbeing is experienced. It draws on a thematic analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews conducted between May 2014 and October 2015 with residents (across socio-economic backgrounds, between 25 and 75 years of age) of the Dibri neighbourhood and its adjacent middle class colonies of Karan Garden and Khanna Nagar.

In this study the lower middle class respondents included those whose household incomes depended mainly on small trade, white collar private or public sector employment at lower level administrative or sales positions, with education levels of earning members not exceeding post graduation (from lesser known educational institutions or distance education) and lacking fluency in English. They were drawn from across caste categories- General (*Baniya*) caste, OBC (*Manihar, Saini and Kumhar*) and SC (*Jatav*). They were long term

¹ New Middle Class refers to the highly differentiated middle class segment that emerged in India at the turn of the 21st century. Its dominant characterization being that of the consuming middle class both the prime votary, agent and beneficiary of liberalization. This dominant image is characterized by benefits to which upwardly mobile segments of the populations aspire. However the NMC is in effect a highly differentiated with members ranging from descendents of the upper caste, old middle class with English education to those from the erstwhile lower income groups from scheduled and backward castes who have experienced upward mobility due to stable employment and access to education (Fernandes, 2007)

² Name changed in the interest of confidentiality.

tenants or owners of residential units not more than 75 sq. yards in size and owned at least two or all of these household assets: two-wheelers and/ a small car, refrigerator and TV.

The paper first conceptualises the relationship between wellbeing and place followed by an overview of the larger context of urban and social transformation within which Dibri is embedded. It draws on connections between the recent redevelopment interventions, the lower middle class residents 5 sq. yards in size change in physical, economic, socio-cultural aspects of their lives in Dibri to present an account of their perceptions of wellbeing.

Wellbeing and place

Wellbeing remains a nebulous concept despite the numerous attempts to define it. The discourse on wellbeing has been marked by contestations about its nature, subjective/objective, process/state, universal/context specific), the levels (individual/collective) and methods through which it should be studied (quantitative/qualitative). Currently the dominant paradigm of wellbeing is one that conceptualises it as an individual subjective assessment of everyday life, affect and satisfaction through a set of universally applicable indicators. This conceptualization of wellbeing has been critiqued by scholars from public health, development studies and anthropology for its failure to account for the role of context in producing the experience, specific meanings and subjective evaluations of wellbeing (Priya, 2000; White, 2008; Gonzales, 2013). I draw on two conceptualizations to understand wellbeing in this study. The first as proposed by Dodge et al (2012), views wellbeing as a socio-culturally embedded state and process involving the dynamic balance between resources, challenges, aspirations and costs involved when individuals and communities attempt to lead a better life (Dodge et al, 2012). Wellbeing is constituted of interpenetrating subjective, material and relational dimensions which are shaped by the specific context within which populations are embedded (White, 2008). This paper focuses on a specific set of material circumstances of people in Dibri, their social relations and the meanings they attribute to both and their evaluations of the same. The subjectivity of its evaluations lies not just at the individual level but is shaped by the content of collective meanings of wellbeing shaped by the specificities of shared context.

One of the important sources of shared meaning is the register of place which refers to the shared setting anchoring and mediating people's everyday lives, human actions and interactions. Human interaction imbues a geographical location with meaning producing a

‘sense of place’ (attachment). Linda Mc Dowell (1999) shows how interaction with(in) cities and neighbourhoods is a means of acquiring and the knowledge’ knowledgeDowell (1999) behaviours, attitudes, language and style, an important resource to negotiate everyday life. According to Mc.Dowell place-making is a process of boundary making in which those who belong and those who don’t are defined through an exercise of power. Thus a place both reflects and produces social inequalities that mediate the experience and meanings of wellbeing for different communities (Atkinson et al, 2012). Embodied knowledge is also a reflection of status and identity produced when place intersects with class, gender, caste and other constructs of social stratification. Thus inequalities produced and reinforced through a place impinge on one’s ability to negotiate the dynamic interplay between resources, challenges and aspirations.

Establishing ‘World Class-ness’

Making Delhi “a global metropolis and a world-class city” was the guiding principle of the Delhi Master Plan 2021- (MPD-2021, January 2016). The phrase ‘World-Class City’ (WCC) began to be used popularly by the then Chief Minister and other government functionaries when Delhi was preparing to host the Commonwealth Games (CWG) 2010 (Sudworth, 2006).

The vision of the WCC was a part of the urban reforms initiated post-liberalisation with the aim of making the city amenable to the entry and operations of big private capital through measures ranging from deregulation to enabling easy connectivity in and to the city. To this end land for private investment was freed up through repeal of the urban land ceiling act and through judicial orders favouring slum evictions, sealing of unauthorised commercial establishments and polluting factories in the city (Baviskar, 2003, Ghertner, 2011). The judiciary and middle class residents’ welfare associations argued for these measures employing the rationale of ‘filth’, ‘pollution’, ‘nuisance’ and ‘illegality’ to ‘clean-up’ the capital and divest it of its poor³; (Chand, 2009; Baviskar, 2006; Ghertner, 2011). Investments in the last decade in Delhi have gone into projects like the construction of the Delhi Metro, flyovers, luxury hotels, malls, and the renovation of the international airport, transforming the capital in accordance to a much-coveted aesthetic associated with megacities like New York,

³ Also see http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5325034.stm and <http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2713/stories/20100702271309800.htm> for media coverage of these developments.

London and Hong Kong City. Embodying qualities of hygiene, order, speed and efficiency, the vision of the WCC found ready votaries in urban middle and upper classes, for it was a symbol of their material and nationalistic aspirations to count in a global order as modern citizens of an emerging global power (Baviskar and Ray, 2011).

Moreover, inclusion in the WCC was contingent on the capacity to cultivate consumption practices and modes of conduct that mimicked images of a global consumer culture, a far cry from the distinctly Nehruvian ethos of austerity which marked the Indian society till the early 1980s. Tantalizing images of lifestyles of the global and Indian rich relayed through the advertisements and satellite television, educated the Indian middle classes about consumption and ways of being that constituted the idea of ‘world class-ness’(Brosius, 2010). However, the ethos of WCCs has heightened aspiration by creating new terms of exclusion that were mapped on to the already existing caste, class and gender inequalities in urban India (Fernandes, 2007; Voyce 2007).

Studying the lower middle class in India

The lower middle class in India is an emergent category in recent research that focused on estimating the size of the Indian middle class and its potential to consume (Fernandes, 2007). However this research considered ‘class’ as equivalent to an ‘income group’, measured on the basis of income and consumption criteria. Within these studies there is a presence of a sizeable fraction at the lower end having income and consumption patterns closer to the poor (Ravallion, 2009; RUPE, 2015). Social scientists, however, make a distinction between ‘income groups’ and ‘classes’; the latter can be studied by examining how income and consumption along with occupation, education, caste and regional and linguistic identities are deployed to maintain a desired location in the existent hierarchies (Deshpande, 2003; Sridharan, 2011). The service-sector boom post-liberalization had enabled the emergence of the urban, upper caste, propertied, English speaking, white collared professional whose employment at the multi-national corporation granted him or her, the perks of working or migrating abroad and high incomes. This segment is a strong votary of economic liberalization and occupies not just the upper echelons of the Indian middle class, but has also come to dominate the political and development discourse in India in the recent past (Fernandes, 2007). The lower segments of the Indian middle class differ substantially from this middle class. They consist of the educated poor, backward and lower caste populations (Vaid, 2012). Estimates from the Market Information Survey of 1998 and later

from PricewaterhouseCoopers pegged their annual household incomes at as little as Rs. 35,000-Rs.70,000 and Rs.150,000- Rs.300,000 respectively (Pricewaterhouse-Coopers, 2010; RUPE, 2015;) Their economic and social stability had been gained through public sector employment in lower level, white collar administrative positions secured with the aid of reservations in education and employment. (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009; Vaid, 2012). The lower middle class harbours an ambivalence towards liberalization which has destabilised their gains from public sector employment through labour market restructuring, forcing its younger generations into precarious, low-paying, private sector employment opportunities with lower prestige (Ganguly-Scrase, 2003; Baviskar and Ray, 2011; Nagaraj, 2014).

Despite their precarious living and working conditions and poor access to even basic amenities, recent findings from the Lok Survey reveal nearly half (47%) of the lower middle class in the study self-identified as middle-class (Kapur and Vaishnav, 2015). Given the limitations of their socio-economic and cultural resources, the journey to fulfill their aspirations to be counted as middle class is riddled with tension and struggles, especially for those from lower and backward castes. The lack of cultural confidence and struggle to gain dignity while holding on to spaces of security is a hallmark of this process of transition (Baviskar and Ray, 2011).

My inquiry in Dibri seeks to understand the negotiations involved in fulfilling aspirations unleashed by urban development interventions and the attendant discourse of world classness precisely within this segment.

Placing Dibri

Dibri, a vibrant neighbourhood close to central Delhi is located strategically vis-a-vis key state institutions and public facilities like railway stations, bus terminals, main market areas and hospitals of the capital city. Established by the colonial rulers in 1921, according to its present residents the colony originated as a 'resettlement' site for populations whose lands were acquired for building the Imperial capital in 1931. Its first inhabitants were villagers from Hindus and Muslim communities, settled along caste and religious lines. Post-Independence commercial activity and movement of populations to and from the neighbourhood had been facilitated by state interventions starting with the arrival of the post-Partition refugees in the 1950s, to the shifting out of dairies in the 1980s that affected both livelihoods and built environment. According to several residents the most recent and

prominent changes in Dibri's built environment and commerce were due to the MPD -2021's directives that altered the neighbourhood's land-use categorisation from 'residential' to 'mixed' and increased Floor Area Ratio⁴ (FAR) (revised subsequently till 2015).

The change in land use sought to impose spatial and fiscal order by regularizing illegitimate commerce and integrating living and work spaces in Dibri. It simultaneously encouraged new commercial activity resulting in the expansion of the market to nearly all parts of the neighbourhood, increasing the congestion in the neighbourhood manifold. The increased FAR to address housing shortage permitted the construction of buildings up to four stories high. Builders and landowners took advantage of the provision causing flashy new buildings to shoot up next to drab grey constructions of the 1980s and in places, stood cheek by jowl with crumbling houses built in the 1930s. They attracted rental populations especially Afghan refugees and Kashmiri traders who further spurred new businesses. While the redevelopment interventions sent property prices skyrocketing, gave a fillip to the rental economy in Dibri and altered the neighbourhood's skyline and social composition they also reduced open spaces, increased population and vehicular density and pollution, heightening Dibri's air of disorderliness. In sharp contrast, Dibri's adjacent colonies, also rehabilitation sites for post-Partition Punjabi refugees, scaled into upmarket areas (what Dibri's residents considered '*acche*' areas) carrying markers of urbane lifestyles - orderly spaces, tree-lined roads, spacious bungalows, sedans and dominated by upper caste, middle and upper middle class professionals and entrepreneurs.

Unlike the more homogenous populations of the *acche* areas, Dibri in its small area of 0.2 sq. km.. accommodated an exceptional diversity of class, caste and religious groups. The bulk consisted of small traders (Hindus- upper castes like Banias, and OBCs including Manihars, Prajapatis and Sainis) and lower level white collar and manual workers (Sainis, Prajapatis and SCs- Jatavs and Balmikis). At the top of the social hierarchy was a small set of very wealthy, upper caste Jain and Bania traders who had traditionally controlled commerce in Dibri. Their younger generations also consisted of an educated professional class moving to other more prestigious neighbourhoods in the city. The middle consisted of a visible, upwardly mobile, entrepreneurial but less educated segment of post-Partition Punjabi Sikhs

⁴ The FAR. is the ratio of total building floor area to the area of the plot. Increasing the FAR is a measure resorted to by the state for addressing housing shortages in the city while at the same time limiting public expenditure. This is done by encouraging populations to invest their private resources in construction of residential and commercial units (TCPO, 2017).

(owning transport, property and private money lending businesses) and a thin slice of Saini traders whose younger generations had also gained from higher education. The dramatic growth in commercial opportunities was mapped on to these existing caste and class inequalities in Dibri. State-led urban interventions not only altered Dibri's built environment but also contributed to a reshaping of material wealth and social relations in the neighbourhood which I illustrate in the following section.

Uneven gains from redevelopment

The entrepreneurial and trading communities in Dibri, the Jains, Baniyas and Sikhs were in a position to step in as builders and property dealers to take advantage of commercial opportunities that the changing property market presented post alteration in land-use categorization and increased FAR. Their ready access to capital, experience and know how, networks in the construction industry, muscle-power and political patronage enabled them to evict squatting tenants and offer deals irresistible to house owners. The builder's entry made it possible for the house owner to gain a new modern house along with additional residential units assuring future rental income despite his own limited financial resources. Through the sale of the remaining floors, the builder reaped profits far exceeding his initial investments in the project.

The advantage presented by the builder however was available only to independent property owners who in Dibri were mostly upper castes or prosperous OBCs like Sainis. The majority of the SC and OBC households were claimants to ancestral properties jointly owned by extended families. Division of properties yielded plots too small to accommodate families of all inheritors. Hence the only solution was to build up, provided the families had the necessary capital. Respondents estimated that about a third of the OBC and forty percent of the SC households who could not afford to build up, had been bought out by the upper caste builders. These SC and OBC sellers could only afford properties in areas like Sangam Vihar and Jaitpur which offered a decidedly poorer quality of life while the move deprived them of the valuable community networks in Dibri. Navneet Kumar Jatav (35 years) observed,

“Whoever has left Dibri has only gone down in life. They were never able to make something of it again. This is such a centrally located area, everything is close by that is why most people do not want to leave Dibri unless they are forced to.”

A substantial proportion of those among the SCs and OBCs who chose to stay on in Dibri, were residing in ancestral properties under litigation. Most such buildings were in part pre-independence load bearing structures, in a state of disrepair. Conflicts among claimants translated into ill-maintained, overcrowded buildings producing environments threatening to the physical and emotional health of the residents. Even those among the SCs who were able to build up, accommodated their families in cramped living spaces. Their need for privacy remained frustrated despite the separate rooms carved out by sacrificing shared open spaces. Central courtyards found in traditional architecture for instance had allowed for a robust community life besides improving air quality within the building.

The loss of shared open spaces in houses impinged severely on elderly men and young married women within families exacerbating physical discomfort and anxiety. Munni Devi Jatav's (75years) diabetic husband who was also a kidney patient was forced to spend the day time at the Ravidas temple. His young daughters-in-law observed the customary *ghoonghat* and hence lacked freedom of movement in their tiny two-room house in his presence. A troubled Munni Devi explained, "They will not be able to do any work or rest if he stays at home. So he comes home only to have his meals and sleep at night. What can one do!"

In sharp contrast however, the fortunes of erstwhile Punjabi refugees in Dibri and in adjacent Khanna Nagar underwent a dramatic turnaround despite their humble origins. Several of those in Khanna Nagar were now owners of "BMW's, Mercedes and Audis" in resident Taranjit Gill's (30 years) words. They were able to build up their small plots, manage their household expenses through rents and supplement their incomes through businesses like private financing and currency exchange. Gill's father himself had been a tea seller in Old Delhi, whose illness pushed his son into a private sector job with a starting salary of Rs.4500 per month in 2005. For a decade Taranjit managed his household expenses through the rent from the upper floors of his house in Khanna Nagar, even as he built assets through other businesses that he refused to divulge. He had simultaneously risen at work to become a manager and was "...the owner of two vehicles that have VIP numbers. From my mobile to my vehicles, all numbers are VIP."

As for the richest among the upper castes in Dibri, they were leaving the neighbourhood choosing residential properties in the most expensive areas of Delhi securing their social status among the wealthiest in the city while using their properties in Dibri to expand their businesses. Sunil Jain for instance had converted his ancestral home in Dibri market into the largest utensil showroom cum warehouse in 2007. He described his establishment as, "the

only shop in Dibri attracting A+ clientele.” His family had bought a house in New Friends’ Colony. He explained, “NFC is a posh area. Bade-bade log (influential people) live there. Priyanka Gandhi and Robert Vadhra.” Jain’s decision to leave Dibri was also influenced by his desire to have his daughters (studying in one of the prestigious schools in the city) grow up in an ‘*acchi*’ colony away from the commercial chaos of Dibri inhabited and frequented by people of all ‘kinds of backgrounds’.

The redevelopment had thus resulted in the further impoverishment and dispossession of sections of the poorer SC and OBC populations. The exodus of community members lacking the economic wherewithal to stay on in the face of rising property prices and commercialisation, was shrinking social networks of the lower middle class SCs and OBCs. The majority of those who stayed back faced physical discomfort and constant quibbles over property and space with fellow community members. Additionally, quality living spaces for future generations seemed an impossibility, for even before gains from reservations in public sector employment could be consolidated or investments in education in the present be redeemed, the shrinking organised sector was undermining their capacity to compete in the property market. Thus the economic and the social dividends of redevelopment in Dibri were being reaped by the traditionally rich or those among the upwardly mobile who enjoyed the support of powerful political patrons.

Responses to growing inequalities in Dibri

In their observations about the growing inequalities spurred by the changing property market, most SC and OBC respondents expressed their sense of betrayal by the state and resented the upward mobility of communities they viewed as “outsiders” even as they felt the market, m. Pradeep Kumar (35 years), clerk in a government department compared the negligible state support extended to Dalits, the “original inhabitants” of Dibri, with the “land and jobs” that the “refugees from Pakistan” had received. In his view the latter were protected even when they flouted norms to build houses that fetched additional incomes of up to a lakh per month, enabling investments in English medium education for their children to further secure upwardly mobile futures. “How will people like us be able to afford it?” he questioned. A smaller proportion of the respondents perceived the recent workings of the property market as a conspiracy to reduce the social and economic presence that Dalits had consolidated in Dibri over the previous decades. Rohit Kumar (28 years), employed as a warehouse supervisor observed that builders often targeted the more naive and helpless

among the Jatavs to sell their land in deals that could not compensate for the loss of opportunities and quality of life that Dibri offered. He contended that the exodus was facilitating the growing economic domination of upwardly mobile communities like the Punjabis.

Even as the SC and OBC communities struggled to maintain their toehold in Dibri, the neighbourhood was fast losing its appeal among the professionally educated, ambitious younger generations of upper caste traders who were moving to gated apartment complexes of Gurgaon and Faridabad. Several of them felt the need to distance themselves from the neighbourhood with visible vestiges of its rural antecedents and absent markers of “development” like order, mobility, open space and privacy. Their narratives of Dibri peppered with references to “old world”, “*chhoti soch*”h(limited vision) “lack of change and ambition” was summed up by younger businessmen in the catch-all phrase ‘*bania mentality*’. Entrepreneur Sumit Jain (42 years) had shifted to a rented apartment in Faridabad, even though his widower father chose to stay on. Jain explained, how Dibri and his aspirations could not be in sync, “Dibri and I never gelled from the beginning. I was ambitious, wanted to travel and looking for privacy, a systematic and glamorous life.”

The educated young among the OBC and SC communities concurred with these criticisms to varying degrees and responded to them with frustration at the ways in which they felt Dibri held them back. Manish Manihar (32years) inherited his fatheramogas repair shop at nineteen when the latter died. Manish lived with his widowed mother and sister in a two room unit (above the shop), part of a larger jointly owned family property locked in litigation. One of Manish agreat desires was to travel; ideally to Switzerland. “It is so clean and orderly. People don’t depend on anyone to get directions. It (the cars) is all automatic,” he had gleaned from a travel programme on Discovery. Partly seeking confirmation he remarked, “ r tly seeking confkeep to themselves. Not getting involved unnecessarily in others’ matters, right?” Though Europe was a distant dream, Manish had learnt (from a friend employed at MakeMyTrip), “a trip to Thailand costs just Rs.25,000. But these indulgences look good only when one achieves something big in life.” In Manish’a calculations a degree followed by a good office job were the first steps to a more respectable life and to a legitimate pursuit of pleasures. At thirty two, battling several odds he enrolled in a BBA programme at a private university. In course of his contact-classes he realised however that any chance in a highly competitive job market called for fluent English with a good accent. “I had considered attending English-speaking classes, but what is the use? At the end of the day

this *mahaul* (social environment) is what one returns to. One learns to speak English properly only when one has someone to speak with. Everyone is the same here. What is the point!”

Sunita Rani Kanwal (28 years) from the Jatav community also lived in a small house on a 65 square yard plot embroiled in a dispute between her father’s ten siblings. Sunita had completed MBA and dabbled in a few private jobs before settling to prepare for banking entrance exams. Unlike Manish and the others, Sunita disagreed with the summary writing off of her neighbourhood. People might desire to move to “more posh” localities but she said it made sense to embrace Dibri, for no other place would offer her and her friends the easy acceptance of relationships nurtured over generations.

“In the new colony, you will be judged for things you do and you will not even know what the acceptable thing is since you do not know their ways. By the time you learn their ways, they would have gone far ahead and you would still be just catching up and would have lost your peace of mind”

Sunita resented characterizations of Dibri as a village.. She believed outsiders resorted to such characterization establish their own superiority. Sunita struggled to establish Dibri as distinct from the rural or poorer neighbourhoods, both of which shared a stigmatizing synonymy with the ‘less developed’. Making a case for her neighbourhood’s urban character, Sunita cited with passion aspects like its location and connectivity, the prosperity of its upper caste residents, the presence of supermarket-like stores and the variety of food joints including MNC food outlets. However she was unable to deny its “inadequacies” like the “narrow mindedness of its people”, its disorderliness or the rustic sound of its name, the heterogeneity of its inhabitants all of which were read as signs of its inferiority vis-a-vis Karan Garden. In an attempt to retrieve Dibri’s moral superiority she suggested that in essence Karan Garden and Dibri were the same, if anything the latter was better because unlike in posh colonies people in Dibri still cared for their neighbours. With sarcasm and some aggression she remarked, “In the present though, it is ‘the brand’ that matters and not substance!”

Conclusion

The discourse of the WCC creates a narrow imagination of who can belong to the city perpetuating the exclusion of those unable to meet the material and cultural standards of a modern lifestyle and consumption that it sets. This paper demonstrates the deepening sense of inadequacy that the impossible standards of a WC imaginary perpetuate among the

marginalised sections of the Indian middle class while continuing to fuel their aspirations to be included in the promise of development and modernity that it espouses. The imaginary of the WCC hinges on a policy imperative favouring deregulation and privatisation which reproduce existing inequalities through their impacts on the physical environment of lower middle class neighbourhoods fostering an enrichment of upwardly mobile sections while shrinking resources of the SC and OBC lower middle class. Simultaneously in a climate of growing privatisation, urban lower middle class populations are facing the prospect of insecurity in the very basic material dimensions that determine wellbeing: like employment and housing. As this paper illustrates, their identification with the place they belong to and the embodied knowledge acquired therein is of little value in a context demanding ‘world-class’ criteria of employability (fluency in English, etiquette and appearance) which seem unattainable given their economic and socio-cultural resources. While the dissatisfaction with highly heterogenous neighbourhoods like Dibri may be shared by inhabitants across caste and occupational backgrounds, the upper caste young tend to have access to economic and cultural capital enough to access other worlds to derive validation and find social support networks. The more marginalised SC and OBCs find themselves continually torn between owning and disowning their own habitat, remain acutely aware of the inadequacies of their ‘embodied knowledges’ experiencing a destabilisation of their place in the world which has serious consequences for their wellbeing.

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