



Negotiation, mediation and subjectivities: how migrant renters experience informal rentals in Gurgaon's urban villages

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Abstract

The population of Gurgaon, a city of an estimated 2.5 million people located south of India's capital Delhi and within the National Capital Region, grew by 73.9 percent in 2001-2011. While Gurgaon's private sector housing market attracted educated migrants, residents of urban villages built rental housing for low-income migrant workers. Based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Nathupur village in 2013 and Sikanderpur village in 2017, this paper focuses on the experience of low-income migrant renters in the informal rental markets that are controlled and managed by village landlords. It focuses on living conditions, sense of security and the nature of tenant-landlord relationships. Despite the dominance of landlords, I posit that migrants mediate their housing choices as per their migration strategy and leverage oral contracts to move flexibly through rental housing in different locations at different times. Further, by characterising landlords as benevolent, renters keep their opportunities for employment and reward open while potentially exerting reputational pressures on landlords through criticism of their exploitative practices. Lastly, migrant renters challenge social norms set by landlords by everyday acts of resistance. These strategies of mediation, negotiation and subjectivities enable rural migrants to establish a relationship, however tenuous, with the city and maximise their returns from it.

Keywords

urban village, migration, landlordism, informal renting

1. Background and provocation

Migration has increased across the world, as people move within and across national borders in pursuit of opportunities related to education and livelihoods. In Asia and Africa, uneven economic development has resulted in complex patterns of human mobility which

include not just permanent migration, but also short-term and circulatory movements as well as commuting: all of which are growing (Chandrasekhar & Sharma, 2015; Echanove & Srivastava, 2014; Leinbach & Suwarno, 1985). Such varying mobilities are placing unique demands on destination cities for housing, basic services and social amenities. These growing and changing demands have created opportunities for a range of private actors in the urban housing market, especially where governments have been unable to meet demand or have withdrawn from housing provision. Within the larger context of the exclusionary city, characterised by a segmented labour market, high costs of housing and formidable barriers to home ownership (Kundu & Ray Saraswati, 2012), a large number of the working poor in the Global South, especially new entrants to the city, live in the informal rental market. Informal rental housing is seen as a response to constrained formal housing supply, especially for the poor and the ‘floating population’ in cities, who private real estate developers do not serve (Kumar, 2001a; Wu, 2016).

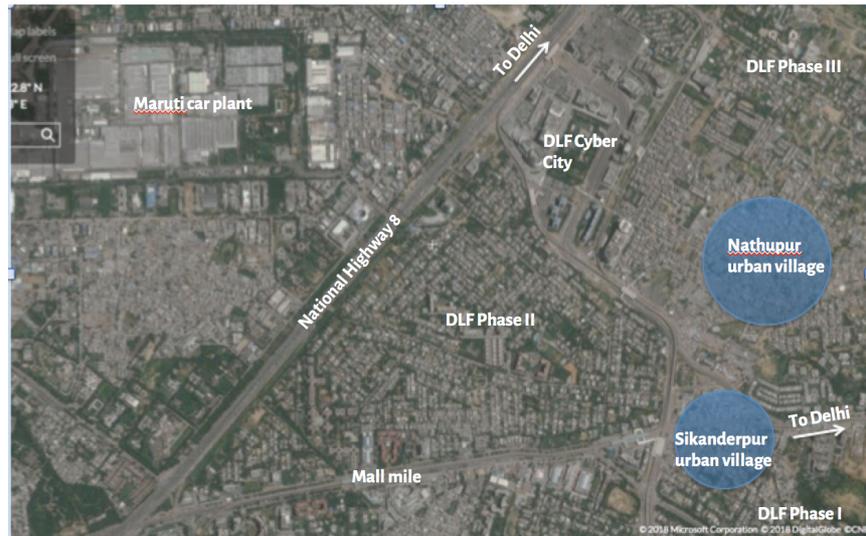
Informal rental includes a broad range of housing, informal in production and/or tenure. Informal rentals are not produced by organised housing suppliers but by homeowners or those informal housing suppliers who Watson (1994) refers to as ‘humble citizens’ in her work on Cape Town, South Africa. Rental units built in settlements with ‘informal’ tenure status, like the favelas in Brazil and squatter settlements in Mumbai, are also referred to as informal rentals. So too is private rental housing where agreements between landlords and renters are not formalised. Some 60–90 per cent of low-income rentals in Asia are in the informal sector (United Nations Human Settlements Programme & United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2008) and 25 per cent of India’s national housing stock comprises informal rentals (National Sample Survey Organisation, 2010). Despite the significance of this form of housing, policy approaches tend to privilege home ownership and vilify informality and self-help housing across the region. In response, scholars like Sunil Kumar (2001a) and Alan Gilbert (2008) have advocated for tenure neutral policies that support informal landlordism as a path to inclusive urbanisation.

We know surprisingly little about how migrant renters experience the informal rental market and how this experience shapes their relationship with the city. In this paper, I examine how migrants negotiate the informal rental market, and how these negotiations relate to their work and life in the city. The research is located in the urban villages of Gurgaon¹, a city of 2.5 million people located at the southern edge of India’s capital, New Delhi. I document experiences related to living conditions, tenure security and the nature of residents’ social interaction in and with the city through the lens of the tenant-landlord relationship. Further, I explore how these experiences connect with their migration strategies and future plans. Thus, I also reflect on how informal rental housing links processes of urbanisation and migration.

¹ Though the official name of the city has been changed to Gurugram, I prefer to use the colloquial Gurgaon in this paper.

Figure 1

Nathupur and Sikanderpur urban villages are co-located with large-scale planned residential and commercial development. **Source: Author**



I locate this enquiry in urban villages specifically because evidence from countries like China, Vietnam and India indicate that traditional settlements - *chengzhongcun*, *kampung* and villages- act as ‘arrival cities’² for migrants, especially in the context of urban expansion (Allen, 2003; Iaquina & Drescher, 2000; Suu, 2009; Wu, Zhang, & Webster, 2013). Moreover, these traditional settlements enjoy relatively more tenure security than squatter settlements, through the granting of protections (Ministry of Urban Development GoI, 2006; Zhang, Zhao, & Tian, 2003).

To inform my analysis of migrant experiences of informal rental housing, I draw on two rounds of fieldwork conducted in urban villages in Gurgaon. The first round was conducted in Nathupur urban village in 2013, and involved semi-structured interviews with 45 migrant renters and 10 landlords with a focus on understanding rental housing typologies and housing choices of migrant renters. Rental housing typologies were also documented through architectural sketches and drawings. A second round of fieldwork was conducted in Sikanderpur Ghosi urban village between March 2017 and December 2018. This round included a mapping of key streets of the settlement for land use, rental housing typologies and density of built form. Interviews with 16 tenants were conducted to document the story of their arrival in the settlement, their experiences as renters as well as their employment conditions in Gurgaon. The tenants were chosen to loosely represent different linguistic and regional groups known to live in Sikanderpur Ghosi. The interviews with 11 landlords were more detailed. These tracked the sale of their agricultural land, the construction of rental housing, their management practices of the rental accommodations, attitudes towards tenants, and the changes in these over time. Three intermediaries who acted as brokers and managers in relatively large rental housing premises (between 15-40 rooms) were interviewed, chiefly about their own role and activities in the rental business. Additionally, four key informants (two teenagers, one elderly lady and one business manager of a skills training

² See Saunders, Doug (2012) *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World*. New York, NY: Vintage

institute located in the urban village) were interviewed to understand the transition of the urban village over time. While a deductive approach was used to analyse the data from Phase 1, data from Phase 2 was analysed through narrative analysis, with an emphasis on insights from each interview as well as comparison and contrast of landlord and tenant interviews.

The paper is organised as follows: the next section (2) describes how urban villages act as arrival cities for migrants with a specific emphasis on Gurgaon's agrarian transformation. Section 3 outlines the complexity of the migrant renter's lived experience of informal rentals drawing on empirical evidence from Gurgaon as well as relevant literature. Section 4 offers an analysis of these experiences, focusing on renters' strategies for negotiating informal rentals. Section 5 contains concluding thoughts and reflections on how these findings relate to larger questions that link migration and urbanisation.

2. Urban villages as 'arrival cities' for rural migrants: The case of Gurgaon, India

About a third of India's population (more than 400 million persons) are internal migrants, having moved from their last place of residence in the census period between 2001 and 2011. Of these long-term migrations, rural to urban movement constitutes 21.8 percent (Census 2001). Additionally, an estimated 40-100 million are short-term migrants³ from rural parts of the country (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009; Srivastava, 2011). Rural households often use migration as a livelihood diversification strategy to counter rural distress, whereby some members of the family migrate to cities or other rural areas while others remain in the village (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). Among short-term migrants, about 71.6 percent of rural males moved to cities (National Sample Survey 2007-08). In the context of these large population movements, it is important to understand how migrants, especially those not intending to permanently settle, find a foothold in these cities.

As cities across India have spatially expanded by the acquisition of agricultural land, indigenous peasants have been permitted to retain their village homesteads. This is common in the National Capital Region (NCR) around Delhi where Gurgaon is located. Urban villages, therefore, are essentially rural settlements "caught in the process of rapid urbanization of a metropolis" and are often specially designated for the residential use of villagers as per Master Plan (Mehra, 2005). These special designations often take the form of exceptions and protections, which allow village residents to utilize land as per their needs. In the NCR, urban villages are protected by a special boundary called the *lal dora* (red line), inside which planning and development controls are not strictly enforced. In China, urban village land remains classified as rural and is therefore exempt from planning controls outlined by city administrations (Zhang et al., 2003).

In situations of agrarian transformation, not just in India but also other Asian contexts, the protection of village land has enabled peasants who have lost their agricultural livelihoods and not found well-paid employment opportunities in newly urbanising areas to rent housing to incoming migrants as a coping mechanism. This has been observed by Suu (2008) in

³ Short-term migrants spend less than 6 months away from home

Hanoi, Vietnam and Bach (2017) in Shenzhen, China. In Delhi, Pati (2014) finds that rental housing is one among several avenues of entrepreneurship that peasants invest in, using the compensation money they received for selling their agricultural land. In Gurgaon, Cowan (2018) finds an “uneven” process of agrarian transformation resulting from the exemptions applied to residential village. This is characterised by the production of urban villages on one hand and, on the other, the emergence of a class of rentiers from amongst the peasant landowning communities who had sold their agricultural land to private developers. This direct sale of land to private developers – without the State as intermediary as is standard for most Indian cities – is the essence of Gurgaon’s development model.

Since the early 1980s private sector real estate developers in Gurgaon, armed with government licenses, have acquired land directly from farmers and built private cities for wealthy non-resident Indians and India’s elite classes. This was achieved through an exercise in ‘flexible planning’ that “accommodated the desires of the wealthy and political elites” by manipulating laws, plans and land (Gururani, 2013, p.122). These changes allowed the city to tap into new opportunities that became available post India’s economic liberalization in 1991, and resulted in a spurt of growth. Gurgaon’s population grew by 73.93 percent in the 2001-2011 period, and the current population is estimated at 2.5 million⁴ compared to 1.5 million in 2011.

Since the 2000s, Gurgaon has seen the emergence of a vibrant real estate sector focused on high quality residential and commercial buildings (Searle, 2016). These have attracted multinational companies and skilled workers in sectors like information technology, finance and business process outsourcing. For low-income migrants from poorer regions in India, the growth spurt in Gurgaon provided opportunities for employment in the informal sector, in industrial jobs, in the construction sector and in services jobs related to security, housekeeping, domestic work, transport, street vending and retail (Naik, 2015).

Gurgaon’s urban villages play a key role as ‘arrival cities’ for migrants, filling a critical gap in housing and infrastructure for this important working group. The development of real estate within these villages to provide rental housing and space for commercial activities becomes an informal solution to enable what O’Donnell (2013), in the context of Shenzhen, calls ‘boomtown conditions’. In cities (like Shenzhen and Gurgaon) that have seen rapid demographic and economic growth, she argues, urban villages have become “the architectural form through which migrants and low-status citizens have claimed rights to the city”. The exemptions that urban villages enjoy, as compared to planned neighbourhoods, enable them to become critical housing markets to support urban expansion (Siu, 2007). As they integrate with the urban economy, their status as non-formal spaces encourages speculative investment. Thus they have in many cases turned entirely into rental markets, with residents moving out while still retaining property in the village for rental income, creating a class of absentee landlords (Sheth, 2017). Landlords are also continually redeveloping Gurgaon’s urban villages to cater to emerging rental needs.

⁴ These estimates are provided by Gurgaon First, a Gurgaon-based NGO working on various aspects of the city’s development (URL: <http://gurgaonfirst.org/gurgaon-factsheet>, accessed on 30 April 2019)

3. Informal rentals in Gurgaon: Lived experiences of renters

This section describes how informal rentals are organised in Gurgaon and offers insights into the lived experience of migrant renters in urban villages, while simultaneously locating these with the larger body of literature on informal rentals and rental housing.

3.1 Types of landlordism

Gilbert (2008) claims that the promotion of home ownership policies across the world has deflected the investments of the rich and influential to shares, land or commercial property rather than rental housing and thus reduced the importance and political agency of landlords. Indeed, small-scale landlords, who own fewer than 10 units, now dominate rental housing in India (UN-HABITAT, 2011), contributing up to 80 percent of available dwellings (Asian Development Bank, 2013).

Sunil Kumar (1996) classifies landlords in informal rentals into three types: ‘subsistence’ landlords who subdivide extremely small lots (20 sq. m in India) and use the rent to supplement essential consumption; ‘petty-bourgeois’ landlords, who are not forced to rent out, but choose to do so to supplement their income and make improvements to their housing; and ‘petty-capitalist’ landlords who see renting as a business proposition and invest in the purchase of additional lots to build accommodation to rent out, with an intent to accumulate capital.

In the specific context of Gurgaon, Cowan (2018) makes a distinction between the dominant landowner who is able to integrate into urban land markets and others who are limited to petty rentiership within the confines of the urban village itself. My own fieldwork shows that it is often the landlord household’s caste position within the village community that determines the kind of landlordism they exhibit. In Sikanderpur, landlords from the Ahir caste (Yadavs) generally have more rental units and are either petty-bourgeois or petty-capitalist landlords who are investing the money they received as compensation from selling large parcels of land in the early ‘80s⁵. The most powerful households were able to capture commons lands in the villages, and build more rental stock. One Yadav couple manages multiple plots of rental housing dispersed across the village. These were previously used for storage, raising cattle and to live in⁶. Another Yadav landlord⁷ revealed that a large parcel of land at the edge of the village was received by his grandfather, the then village headman, as additional compensation for selling a parcel located elsewhere, which was crucial for a developer to assemble land for development. In contrast, dalit⁸ landlords in both villages are visibly poorer⁹, and most likely to be subsistence landlords, more in the vein of Watson’s (1994) “humble citizens”.

⁵ Interview with Yadav landlord J. Yadav in Sikanderpur on 24 July 2017

⁶ Interview with landlady Sangeeta (name changed) in Sikanderpur on 2 August 2017

⁷ Interview with Yadav landlord M Singh in Sikanderpur on 25 May 2017

⁸ A term used for socially disadvantaged caste groups that remain outside the formal 4-fold caste system

⁹ Interview with Dalit landlord A Singh in Sikanderpur on 7 June 2017

3.2 Typologies: Affordability and living conditions

Urban villages in Gurgaon exhibit a range of informal rentals for migrant tenants with different levels of income and varying expectations in terms of amenities, privacy and security (Naik 2015). While the diversity of informal rental options is essential for migrants to be able to secure a foothold in the city (Kumar, 1996), in Gurgaon quality and cost vary substantially among the typologies.

Overall, rental prices are higher for properties with better quality of construction. So while shacks built of temporary materials are at the lowest end, buildings with better construction technology and materials (like reinforced concrete) are more expensive. Renters generally opt for housing that they can afford. The data from phase 1 of the study indicates that the majority of renters (80 percent) opt for housing that costs below 30 percent of their expected monthly wages.

Figure 2

This tenement in Nathupur is typical of the kind built by petty-capitalist landlords in Gurgaon's urban villages

Source: Author



Urban villages like Nathupur and Sikanderpur are under serviced. Both villages face severe water shortage issues and only parts of the settlement have an underground sewer network, which is overstretched as the additional load owing to rental housing was not considered during its design. Landlords and tenants do face similar conditions of service under-provisioning, but in Gurgaon we find that tenants are worse off because landlords ration water and do not build adequate amenities like baths and toilets, especially for the cheaper rental typologies. Further, in order to save on rent, tenants are more likely to live in conditions of crowding in poorly built housing with inadequate light and ventilation (Naik, 2015). Of the 45 tenants interviewed in Phase 1, 20 reported sharing toilets with other households and 2 reported that they did not have toilet facilities at all; 41 reported sharing bath facilities; and only 2 respondents considered that light and ventilation in their home was adequate enough to do household chores during the day.

Whether landlords and tenants live side by side or in physically separate plots, petty-capitalist and petty-bourgeois landlords in Gurgaon separate their family houses from the rental units, and build rental units at lower standards of design and construction. In a similar

vein, Gulyani et al. (2012) found that tenants lagged behind owner-occupiers in terms of access to water, electricity and latrines in the slums of Dakar and Nairobi.

Landlords are also constantly innovating and adding new typologies to meet emerging demands. This is clear when observing the change in typologies across both phases of fieldwork. During Phase 1 of the fieldwork in Nathupur, the majority of renters were low-income, low-skilled migrants from the poor northern and eastern parts of India. Because the urban village was close to a large commercial development, young workers working in the corporate sector had also started seeking rental housing in Nathupur, prompting some landlords to upgrade or redevelop their properties. In Sikanderpur, during Phase 2 of the fieldwork, informal rentals were catering equally to students and educated workers in the formal job market, as to informal sector workers. Its location near the Delhi Metro network further prompted redevelopment activity as landlords sought to extract more rent from the land parcels they owned.

Table 1

Informal rental typologies and monthly rentals
Source: Adapted by author from field interviews, observations and drawings

| Typology | Monthly rentals | |
|--|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | Nathupur (2011) | Sikanderpur (2017) |
| Shacks and tenements made of semi-permanent materials | INR 700-1500 (USD 10-22) | INR 1800-2800 (USD 25-40) |
| Multi-story tenements with common amenities | INR 1800-2200 (USD 25-32) | INR 4000-6000 (USD 58-87) |
| Single rooms clustered around common amenities | INR 1500-3000 (USD 22-43) | |
| One-room sets/Apartments | INR 3500-6000 (USD 50-87) | INR 6,000-10,000 (USD 87-145) |
| Paying guest accommodation (hostels) for students, singles | None | INR 8000-11,000 (USD 115-159) |

3.3 Rental contracts and 'security of occupancy'

The standard agreement in Gurgaon's informal rentals appears to be in the form of an oral contract, with cash being the dominant mode of payment. This is consistent with what literature tells us of informal rentals across the world: formal contracts are absent, oral contracts and cash payments are common, receipts are not usually provided and in fact, there is usually no formal record of the tenancy at all (Taylor, Banda-Thole, & Mwanangombe, 2015; Wu, 2016).

In general, the lack of formal contracts has been understood to make tenants vulnerable to exploitation from landlords. Tenants face the risk of arbitrary increases in rent, sudden evictions and poor quality maintenance of rental housing (Gunter, 2014; Hooper & Cadstedt, 2014). However, while tenants in Gurgaon do see rent increases as a problem, they do not report eviction as a particular threat. Similar to what Mahadevia and Gogoi (2011) find in Rajkot, migrants talk about some level of flexibility, not so much in the amount of rent paid but in the timing of the rental payment. This flexibility was evident during demonetisation in November 2016, when the Government of India suddenly withdrew specific

denominations of currency from circulation, creating a severe cash shortage¹⁰. During this time, landlords permitted tenants' delayed payments as well as payments in instalments. Field visits in Kapashera urban village in Gurgaon, conducted at the time, revealed that landlords would rather wait for the cash to come a few months later, than take cheque payments that would reflect in their accounts and likely attract taxation¹¹. Landlords as well as tenants in Sikanderpur reported similar arrangements while talking about demonetisation, during our fieldwork in 2017. Recent efforts to formalise the informal in India¹² have meant that established practices of informal renting like oral contracts and cash payments are increasingly perceived to be in the grey zone of legality. In Sikanderpur, landlords – especially in the subsistence and petty-bourgeois categories – are highly dependent on tenants for not just income, but income in cash that they do not declare.

How are we to understand the ubiquitous use of oral contracts in informal rentals given the associated forms of insecurity? Scholars have found that the lack of written and formalized contracts between landlords and tenants signifies a certain kind of trust. However, in urban villages in Gurgaon, the basis of trust is not kinship networks of the kind found by Kumar (2001b) in Surat, India. The hegemony of village residents over migrants allows Gurgaon's landlords to enforce oral contracts through the mere threat of violent repercussions, which acts as a deterrent for rent defaults. In his research in two slums in Hyderabad, India, Sinha (2016) also finds that informal contracts are enforced, not by the use of violence per se, but through a more “complex dynamic mediated by identity, gender and customary or de facto law”. The oral contract therefore becomes de facto law in informal rental situations in urban villages, where social structures are strongly influenced by gender, caste and migration status.

The drive towards formalisation intersects with other kinds of insecurities, however, that are initiating changes in rental agreements in Gurgaon's urban villages. Landlords have begun to check tenant's identity papers and register tenant details at the local police station in conformity with verification procedures devised for formal sector rental housing. Some ask for letters from employers, as a way to verify the credentials of the renter and assess their intentions of staying in the city¹³. These trends reveal landlords' concerns for securing their property and for mitigating risk in the face of growing paranoia around security, terrorism and illegal refugees in India's national discourse¹⁴. These changes do not emerge out of tenants' demands to reduce precariousness. In Sikanderpur, however, where landlords are starting to redevelop plots to build rental housing for middle-income residents working in

¹⁰ See (Ghosh, Chandrasselhar, & Patnaik, 2017) for an analysis of India's demonetization exercise

¹¹ Interview with landlord D Singh in Kapashera on 6 December 2016

¹² While increases in digital transactions was a stated goal of demonetisation in 2016, increased tax compliance and revenues drove the introduction of a new Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime in 2017. Both policies were presented as efforts to formalize the informal in India. See interview with then Finance Minister at <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/o39vPkcXTxllstOUllmqZK/Demonetisation-a-step-in-formalisation-of-economy-says-Jait.html>

¹³ Interview with landlord Premchand (name changed) in Sikanderpur on 25 May 2017

¹⁴ These fears have since triggered Hindu-Muslim tensions in Gurgaon, in which local villagers are caught between their majoritarianism and their need to make their rental properties attractive to a diverse set of migrant tenants. See <https://thewire.in/communalism/gurgaon-namaz-ramzan-sanyukt-hindu-sangharsh-samiti>

Gurgaon's corporate sector, unregistered leases and advance deposits that are ubiquitous in formal sector rental housing are beginning to appear.

These trends demonstrate that perception matters in contractual agreements. This is reminiscent of Hulse et al. (2011) framework of 'secure occupancy'. Though developed in the context of low-income formal sector rentals and perhaps not directly applicable to the case under discussion, the framework draws particular attention to the role of cultural norms and social practices in shaping perceptions of security in rental housing. The authors claim that, in addition to the lenses through which housing is usually analysed, like (a) the market lens (including factors like affordability, income, demand and supply); (b) the legal lens (including factors like secure of tenure and discrimination); and (c) the social policy lens (which focuses on access, well-being, health, etc.); a socio-cultural lens that pays attention to norms and beliefs of renters, owners and managers about the meaning of home and the ontology of security is important to understand renting. Drawing on this, I argue that the wide use of oral contracts and the underlying forms of trusts, as well as contrasting moves towards documentation, complicate the notions of secure occupancy in the context of informal rentals.

3.4 Landlord-tenant relationships

The perception of security is closely linked to the kind of relations landlords and tenants share, which can be tense owing to unequal power as well as symbiotic and interdependent at the same time (Cadstedt, 2010). The relationship between landlords and tenants in Gurgaon's urban villages does, as the literature indicates, differ by the type of landlordism. Subsistence and petty-bourgeois landlords have closer and longer-term relationships with their renters, often going out of their way to help them; not hiking rents often or permitting time extensions on rent payments. Some landlords provided the tenant a small space to start a small business, like a mobile food stall or a shack where they could iron clothes¹⁵. In another case, the landlord contracted his tenant to build an additional set of rooms for rent, providing him steady employment for several weeks¹⁶. In most instances, long-standing tenant-landlord relationships were born out of a status quo situation in which rents were not hiked significantly as long as the landlord made no improvements to the property. A domestic worker from Bengal recounted how her landlord, whom she referred to as a 'good' person, had provided interim accommodation while he upgraded his rental property from temporary shacks to brick and mortar rooms for rent¹⁷.

On the other hand, tenants in larger rental clusters often did not know their landlord directly and dealt only with the caretaker of the property¹⁸. In Nairobi's 'tenement cities',

¹⁵ Interview with Yadav landlord J Singh in Sikanderpur on 7 June 2017 and with landlord S Yadav on 27 April 2017

¹⁶ Interaction with landlord inspecting the redevelopment of rental housing on his plot, Sikanderpur, 9 October 2018

¹⁷ Interview with female tenant in Sikanderpur, 27 April 2017

¹⁸ Interview with caretakers Tinnu (name changed) in Sikanderpur on 24 March 2017 and Deepak (name changed) on 27 April 2017

Huchzermeyer (2007) similarly finds that landlords are elusive characters who do not know their tenants directly and operate through agents. These petty-capitalist landlords are entrepreneurs with political influence that, she argues, creates the unequal landlord-tenant relations that inhibit the ability of tenants to negotiate and make demands. In Sikanderpur, I found instances in which these intermediaries were trusted figures, usually former tenants. Deepak, a migrant from Bihar in eastern India, is the right hand man of a landlord in Sikanderpur who manages rental units as well as helps out with many small businesses like the delivery of drinking water, wholesale food supplies, transport businesses, etc. “I am not treated not like an employee, but as family,” he told me¹⁹.

Unlike the mutual interdependence of landlords and tenants that Cadstedt (2010) refers to, landlord-tenant relationships in Gurgaon are nearly always unequal, regardless of the type of landlordism. Migrants cannot contend with the political power that landlords have on account of being locals. Village residents, almost all of them landlords, maintain this status quo by colluding to keep migrants off electoral rolls, mostly by refusing them proof of address that would enable migrants to register as local voters. As one landlord told me: “Who wants a councillor²⁰ from Bengal or Bihar to represent us?”²¹

These unequal power relationships result in certain specific forms of exploitation. Migrants are often considered captive customers and forced to buy rations from the landlord’s grocery store or that landlords impose behavioural norms on tenants²². They also report that landlords charge them for electricity at rates higher than the official unit cost, and curtail their use of water²³.

Tenants also face discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and gender in informal rental housing. While at a broad level, landlords do not particularly care about who their tenants are as long as they can pay rent regularly, they do express objections to certain types of migrants. A Yadav landlord of Nathupur village is clear that he ‘blacklists’ Nigerians, especially those without a job or who do not have the required identification documents, because he associates Nigerians with illegal activities like drugs²⁴, a widespread perception across Delhi and the NCR (Taraporevala & Negi, 2014).

In Sikanderpur, I also heard concerns about migrants from North-East India, who have long experienced racism in various parts of India on account of their Mongoloid looks and distinctive clothing, food and language (McDuié-Ra, 2012). Some villagers object to the westernized way in which girls dress and complain that the men are into drinking and drugs, which spoils the *mabaul* (atmosphere) of the village²⁵. Those who continue to rent to North-Eastern migrants say they watch their tenants closely and have become wary of situations in

¹⁹ Interview with Deepak in Sikanderpur on 27 April 2017

²⁰ Elected member of the municipal council

²¹ Interview with Yadav landlord J Singh in Sikanderpur on 7 June 2017

²² Interview with Arti Jaiman of community radio station *Gurgaon ki Awaz* on 14 March 2013. She provided instances from the show *Saara Aasmaan Hamara* which focuses on issues of belonging and integration of migrants in Gurgaon

²³ Interview with Bandita (name changed) in Sikanderpur on 2 August 2017

²⁴ Interview with Parvinder Yadav (name changed) in Nathupur on 15 July 2013

²⁵ Interview with Yadav landlord Paramveer (name changed) in Sikanderpur on 24 March 2017

which local youth would clash with the men or pass lewd comments on the women. To mitigate the tensions, the police have set up liaison groups in the village, but local residents report that the police side with the migrants. When I asked one affluent landlord to cite a specific instance of everyday conflict, his response was “*raaste se hattbe nahi* (they do not move out of our way)”. The same respondent, while referring to the Nepali community in the village, spoke about the tolerance of the villagers in “allowing” the community to collectively celebrate important festivals and express their identity²⁶. This indicates that local residents are selective in their attitude towards migrant communities. Those that have some cultural similarities with them are tolerated, while migrants from the North-East evoke discomfort. These migrants are vilified for their non-conformity with the cultural norms and the power dynamics of these urban villages. Men in the village particularly resent the westernized attire of girls from North-Eastern India.

Tenants report particular discomfort with the surveillance that they are subjected to by landlords, who often have a shop on the street level, which can be used to watch the comings and goings of tenants. This surveillance is ostensibly intended to ensure that tenants do not overcrowd or damage their premises and use water responsibly. It also assumes moralistic overtones, seeking to ensure that tenants of opposite genders do not mix, outside of marriage. Tenants report that landlords are particularly strict about visitors, often questioning the nature of the relationship the visitor has with tenants, and the purpose and duration of the visit. A female tenant had to once ask visiting relations to wait in the park through the day and sneak them in at night, to escape the notice of her landlord²⁷.

Female renters and single women in India face high degrees of sexual violence from landlords and male relatives (Baruah, 2007) especially because property is controlled by men. In Gurgaon, surveillance is particularly harsh for unmarried women and young girls.

One young tenant, who works as a beautician at a nearby mall, told us how offensive it is for her that her landlord stares suspiciously at the clothes she dries out everyday. In addition to the everyday harassment she faces on the streets in the form of lewd comments, it is very disconcerting for her that her landlord too objectifies her, making her feel unsafe²⁸. Landlords admit to tracking the comings and goings of unmarried female tenants, sometimes at the behest of the tenants’ parents²⁹. In some properties, I also found that CCTV cameras were installed in the corridors of tenements, in complete disregard to the privacy of tenants.

Despite these varied experiences of discrimination and exploitation, tenants commonly characterize the landlord as ‘good’ or ‘helpful’. Landlords see themselves as protectors of tenants, with nearly every landlord in the sample mentioning their role in resolving disputes amongst tenants. The tenant’s status in the urban village appears to be affiliated with that of the landlords, for instance, tenants of politically powerful, rich or upper caste landlords enjoyed an implicit protection from harassment. In Nathupur, an elderly landlord likened his

²⁶ Interview with landlord Premchand (name changed) in Sikanderpur on 25 May 2017

²⁷ Interview with Bandita (name changed) in Sikanderpur on 2 August 2017

²⁸ Interview with Suman in Nathupur on 20 April 2013

²⁹ Interview with Parvinder Yadav (name changed) in Nathupur on 15 July 2013, and with Lata, caretaker of working women’s hostel in Sikanderpur on 24 March 2017

tenants to the erstwhile crops on his field, who he owned and took care of for his own eventual benefit³⁰. While this kind of “vocabulary of ownership rights over tenants” (Cowan, 2015) in Gurgaon seemingly contrasts with the tenants’ description of landlords as ‘good’ and benevolent, it falls neatly within the framework of ‘care and control’ used by Green *et al.* (2015) to explain how vulnerable tenants are controlled by landlords by establishing a caring relationship in which the line between care and control is blurred. For instance in the UK, Lister (2005) observes that landlords place methods of surveillance like standing around the street and making unannounced social calls in the garb of care to prevent possible misuse of property.

4. Mediation, negotiation and subjectivities: Interpreting migrant renters experiences

Migrant tenants in Gurgaon’s urban villages are in a position of disadvantage as compared to landlords, who are more powerful socially and economically, to varying degrees. While this inhibits any sort of collective action and keeps renting “with the private sphere” (Cadstedt, 2006), tenants do find ways to navigate the system of informal rentals to achieve some form of economic mobility.

4.1 Migration strategy mediates housing choice

Migrant tenants leverage informal rentals in particular ways to secure a small foothold in the urban economy. The diversity of rental typologies helps migrants find housing of varying quality at price points that suit their income situations. These choices are usually mediated by their migration strategies. For instance, migrants living in *jbuggis* or shacks accept the poorer living conditions in order to maximize the remittances they send home, or the savings they make in order to finance property, social obligations and medical expenses that will be made in their rural places of origin. In contrast, those who intend to find a firmer foothold in the city opt for better quality rental units. Typically, these households are also making investments in educating their children, whether in Gurgaon or at their home location, with the long-term vision of inter-generational transition to an urban, middle class life.

4.2 Tacit nature of contracts leveraged for flexibility

Further, while risking violence, tenants take advantage of the informality of the rental agreement to pursue their migration goals. Leveraging the tacit understanding that oral contracts entail minimum obligations toward landlords, tenants move in and out of rental housing as per their needs. Some of my respondents did this to explore work opportunities in other cities, others changed jobs within Gurgaon and preferred to live close to their place of work and minimize transport time and costs³¹. Tenants reported these as practical

³⁰ Interaction with elderly landlord (name unknown) in Nathupur, 17 April 2013

³¹ Interview with tenants Sarika and Sanjay (names changed) in Nathupur on 23 June 2013

decisions, but they are – perhaps without fully realizing – taking advantage of the plentiful supply of informal rentals and the dependence of landlords on this income. In fact, landlords frequently talk about the unpredictable duration of stay for tenants. In their narrations, the flexibility of tenants to move out is granted (by landlords) in fair exchange for the power they possess to evict tenants, even over minor issues³². In this manner, the oral rental contract functions outside of a legalistic framework. It draws on cultural norms and social practices, in the manner of Hulse et al. (2011) ‘secure occupancy’ framework, to evolve a tacit understanding of what constitutes right and wrong. In practice, it is a negotiation in which tenants have some leverage within unequal power relations.

4.3 Countering exploitation and discrimination through subjectivity and resistance

By constructing the landlord as an oppressive, yet benevolent figure, migrant renters are expressing their dissatisfaction about poor living conditions, harassment and exploitation while at the same time keeping open the possibilities of gain from the landlord. As a counter to the care and control tactics of landlords, renters use praise as a way to appease them, while simultaneously being vocal about the negative experiences of informal rentals.

Building these relations are particularly important for long-term renters, who may seek rewards from landlords in the form of business finance, commercial spaces to operate small retail, or direct employment in rental housing and other businesses that landlords own. A careful navigation of the good landlord/bad landlord narrative allows some renters to carve out independent identities in these urban villages, and over time break into regular employment. It may also assist them to acquire local identification papers that provide proof of residence and permit them to register as an urban voter. In short, keeping in the landlords’ good books brings gains to those intending to stay in the city long-term. Criticism of landlords puts renters at risk of violence and eviction, certainly, but it also potentially sullies the reputation of landlords who are dependent on rental incomes. Reputation is important for landlords as they seek to periodically redevelop their properties, pitching improved units to higher paying and more discerning customers. There is no evidence, however, of tenants using reputational damage as a bargaining tool.

In contrast to these subtle negotiations, female renters from North-East India resist the objectification they face from male landlords and village residents in Sikanderpur simply by continuing to wear westernised clothing and claiming the streets as retail customers and pedestrian commuters. By not cooperating with the patriarchal norms that landlords seek to impose, these women exhibit what Scott (1985) calls “everyday forms of resistance.”

5. Conclusions and reflections

Informal rental housing in Gurgaon’s villages offers migrants a foothold in the city. In the absence of formal sector affordable housing options, informal rentals allow migrants to

³² Interview with landlady Sangeeta (name changed) in Sikanderpur on 2 August 2017

tap into a vibrant labour market that spans a range of sectors and job profiles. Certainly, poor living conditions, uncertainties associated with oral contracts and forms of exploitation and discrimination in informal rentals add to the precariousness of the migration experience. However, I argue that beyond these apparent flaws, the migrant experience of informal rentals is characterised by mediation, negotiation and subjectivities that enable them to establish a relationship, however tenuous, with the city and maximise their returns from it.

Renters allow their migration strategy to guide their choice of rental housing and they calibrate their expectations of living conditions accordingly. They leverage the oral contracts to move flexibly through rental housing in different locations at different times. By simultaneously criticizing and praising landlords, they keep their opportunities for employment and reward open while potentially exerting reputational pressures on landlords. Lastly, migrant renters challenge social norms set by landlords by everyday acts of resistance. These strategies take the focus away from frameworks like tenure security, legality, and building codes that dominate the housing policy discourse. Instead, they urge researchers and policymakers to recognize the complexity of informal rental housing, and the role of tenants, landlords and intermediaries in evolving workable codes to manage and regulate this form of housing supply.

Urban villages like Nathupur and Sikanderpur narrate two parallel stories of rural-urban transitions. Firstly, of the agrarian transformation that turns fields into urban developments and peasants into urban rentiers and, secondly, of rural youth who are sent to the city in an attempt to diversify household livelihoods. In the rental tenements of these villages, these stories intertwine in particular ways as landlords and tenants engage in complex and often implicit negotiations to make informal rentals work to their respective advantage.

As landlords evolve new housing typologies and redevelop plots to meet emerging rental needs, new types of tenant-landlord relationships are likely to emerge. There are also early signs that the informal rental market in Gurgaon is imitating forms of record keeping and contracting currently characteristic of formal housing markets. This raises concerns about whether informal rentals will continue to be affordable to low-income renters working informal sector jobs in cities like Gurgaon. Policy interventions will need to be agile and participative to address these complex issues.

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