

Transforming property relations in Delhi's marginal geographies

IRIS Research Report for Summer 2022

Sahil Sasidharan, Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin-Madison

My doctoral research project entails studying contemporary land-to-property transformations in India's capital territory of Delhi's marginal geographies that foreground private property rights in land. My focus is on studying emerging property relations in peripheral rural villages in the National Capital Territory of Delhi that are earmarked for suburbanization. Through a critical analysis of associated legal, political and material technologies that come together in spatiotemporal practices of city planning and land administration to produce situated urban subjectivities, I aim to understand how these new property markets reinforce socio-spatial segregation at the margins of the city, along lines of race, caste, class and gender.

As a researcher-cum-practitioner who has spent a number of years practicing in the urban sphere, I am cognizant of the true cost of time and energy for thinking, reflecting, sharing, caring and 'being there', on the field-site, rather than elsewhere. Being there, on site, placing and situating oneself (one self) in another (an other) world requires not only purpose, direction and time, but also resources, and the consent of those who come to represent that emergent field-site at various points of place-time. In that regard, I am first and foremost thankful to all those who spared their valuable time and resources for my research this summer. I would like to warmly express my deep gratitude to UW-Madison's Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) for their Area and International Studies Award for Incoming Graduate Students that funded my research fieldwork and training (summer schools, conferences etc.) this year. With this support, I was able to undertake a multi-location trip primarily to Delhi, India and Athens, Greece for preliminary fieldwork over the summer and attending an international academic conference. This trip also included remotely attending an International Political Economy and Ecology (IPEE) summer school (due to pandemic-related delays in visa processing for travel to Toronto, Canada) related to my research topic, organized by York University. As a second year Ph.D. student in Geography researching the impact of emerging property relations on marginalized communities in Delhi, conducting preliminary fieldwork over the summer was extremely beneficial for my project's development and shall ground my dissertation proposal or grant and funding applications in the future. Fieldwork over the summer break allowed me various opportunities to network and connect with scholars, practitioners and researchers who have been working on similar topics and/or geographies in Delhi, which helps in positioning my work within the larger scholarship around contested property studies. I was also able to meet with representatives of governmental and non-governmental organizations whose work was crucial towards informing and nuancing my research project. Between bouts of fieldwork in Delhi, in August 2022 I was also able to travel to Athens, Greece (with my partner, on her personal expenses) to attend the International Sociological Association's RC21 conference that is focused on urban studies. For attending this conference, I would also like to acknowledge the added support of the Geography department at UW-Madison. As a researcher focused on urban geography, the opportunity to attend this conference while co-organizing and hosting a series of panel presentations on the topic of 'Law and Ordering the Urban' was a highly potent opportunity for my academic journey. In terms of networking, the summer school and the conference enabled meeting scholars from South Asia and elsewhere working on similar questions and geographies. Support from IRIS went towards covering travel and per diem costs that enabled a personally and professional generative summer.