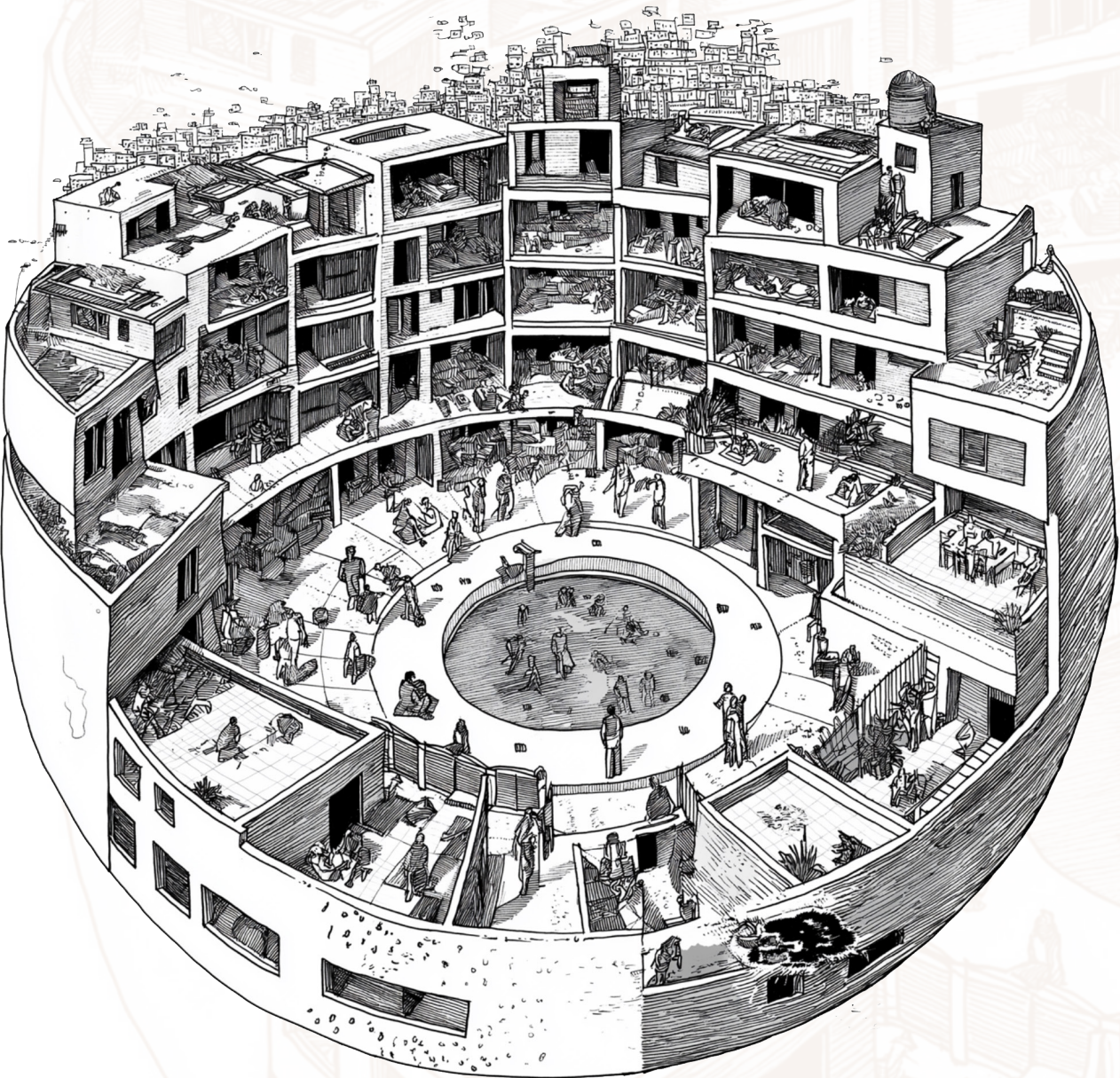


01 | *Notun Ghor* Odyssey

Archita Bandyopadhyay



A gated complex where architecture stages community-crafting shared belonging, even as it quietly fortifies boundaries that keep the unfamiliar at bay. The author produced this image via prompts on Midjourney AI, a generative artificial intelligence program and service owned by the San Francisco-based independent research lab Midjourney, Inc.

Vignette 1 - Sketch I

Driving through Whitefield, Bengaluru, a couple, Dev and Shruti, spot an on-site advertisement banner along a compound wall. It promises luxurious three and four-bedroom apartments, clad in floor-to-ceiling glass and a clubhouse with a rooftop swimming pool. Adding to the bells and whistles, is the imagery of their favourite celebrity couple neatly dressed, using the barbecue grill in a lush garden surrounded by trees and bushes. Other people depicted in the hoardings mirrored the celebrity couple - radiant, wealthy, and seemingly existing on the glimmering surface of life. They notice a row of supercars parked on the property. Their curiosity piques, compelling them to explore further.

Vignette 2 - Sketch I

In one of the many Instagram-worthy cafés in Koramangala, where the aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingles with chatter, a set of posters catches the eye. They advertise an eclectic series of paid events: a shibori printing workshop in the terrace garden, a dessert-making masterclass in the kitchen, and a thought-provoking talk on the politics of body hair near the outdoor seating. Amid this backdrop, 29-year-old UX designer Deepa is engrossed in browsing the myriad gated communities listed on a popular real estate website. Deepa currently resides on the first floor of a house, with her landlord occupying the ground floor. While the arrangement is convenient, it poses a significant hurdle to her hopes of living with her partner. The idea of a live-in relationship in her current setup feels like an insurmountable challenge.

Vignette 3 - Sketch I

Under the golden hues of a Bangalore sunset, Swati and Arun, an NRI couple fresh from their bustling life in San Francisco, sat on the verandah of their parents' house. The air was filled with the sweet fragrance of blooming mallige (jasmine), a comforting reminder of home. They were awaiting their friends Mali and Tarun, whom they knew from their days back in California, to talk about their five-year-old's school prospects. Sipping on filter coffee offered by their domestic help who lives with them, the two shared a moment of elation. One of the perks they had missed most during their years abroad was the ease of domestic help. The thought of having a

housemaid and other staff at their service brought broad smiles to their faces. This convenience, coupled with the joy of being closer to their ageing parents, made their decision to return even sweeter.

Homes reflect distinct pursuits, hold disparate convictions, and showcase divergent customs. Moving into or buying a new home is as much about culture, place, and meaning-making as it is about economic opportunities, convenience, and upgrading. This essay is a collision of observations and mixed messages, born from an urge to make sense of gated communities, their residents, aspirations, and never-ending expectations. It narrates the process of acquiring a new home experienced by people from different socio-cultural backgrounds to understand the role of the built form along with the various tangible and intangible aspirations that drive this phenomenon.

Fritz Steele (1981) identifies the confluence of three elements in the formation of place. First, the physical surroundings and social context form the setting, essentially preparing grounds for viewing settings and people as transactional systems that are interdependent and influence each other. Second, at the intersection of setting and person - psychological factors - the way in which a person perceives a place gives rise to a particular sense of place. Third, the spirit of place, which includes physical characteristics that give a setting its 'spirit' - strong location, clear boundaries, geographic distinctiveness, scale, and proportion.

Using Steele's identification of elements in the formation of place for narrative cues, this essay, structured as a series of vignettes, explores the intersection of ideas of identity, aspirations and the notion of the Notun Ghor - meaning new home in the Bengali language - through the lens of different characters. These characters include a young couple looking to buy a home in a coveted neighbourhood, a live-in couple seeking to rent a home, and an NRI family with ageing parents aspiring to buy a home - all within the context of gated communities in Bangalore. The scenes of the essay play

out in domestic spaces or at the community and locality levels, resonating with the macro contexts of politics, relationships, and societal pressures. The vignettes provide insights into how one's social and cultural position colours one's imagination, aspirations, and ideas of what dwelling in a new home means.

Setting the Stage - Gated Communities in Bangalore's Urban Landscape

In one of the earliest books written on the topic of 'gated communities' the authors Blakely & Snyder (1997) propose the following definition -

'Gated communities are residential areas with restricted access in which normally public spaces are privatized. They are security developments with designated perimeters, usually walls or fences, and controlled entrances that are intended to prevent penetration by non-residents' (p.2).

The liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s and the nation's amplifying economic and social globalisation set the context for Bangalore's rise as a hub of Information Technology (IT), thereby earning it the sobriquet of 'India's Silicon Valley' (Heitzman, 2004; Nair, 2005). From a city of 786,343 people in 65.86 square kilometres in 1951, Bangalore expanded in 2001 to a metropolis of 531 square kilometres housing a population of 5.7 million. During the same period, it metamorphosed from a national hub for development to an international destination, attracting multinational corporations, returning NRIs and foreign expatriates who were drawn by the opportunities that the city offered. The returning migrants 'who are also transnational in their cultures and connections were successfully targeted and wooed by the developers of the high-end gated developments' (Chacko & Varghese, 2009, p.59).

Gated developments as a housing typology in Bangalore began to proliferate across the city in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the wake of the IT boom (Deccan Herald, 2013). Bangalore now houses a population of 14 million (World Population Review, 2024) and has seen a rapid rise in the development of these enclaves. In turn, the enclaves have grown to be complex and diverse with respect to their social, economic, spatial and political structures.

The lure of gated residential communities is interwoven with the city's economic and social evolution. Bangalore's metamorphosis into a global IT hub has catalysed the development of these enclaves, attracting residents who seek a lifestyle aligned with

their aspirations, professional ambitions and global perspectives. This backdrop serves as a broader setting for individuals like Dev, Shruti, Deepa, Swati and Arun, who traverse the city's housing landscape in search of an elevated lifestyle, convenience and a sense of community.

Vignette 1 - Sketch II

On entering the property, a manicured garden leads Dev and Shruti to the sales office wherein the display of the high-end interior setting is conspicuous. Equally striking is the architectural rendering that promises a chrome and lustrous future. Having offered refreshments, with practiced ease a quirky sales manager gestures expansively towards the glossy brochures revealing a host of amenities designed to cater to a modern lifestyle. The community boasts a supermarket, a beauty parlour, a state-of-the-art gym, and a squash court. And the pièce de resistance? An indoor mini-theatre, ideal for hosting private movie nights.

Exclusivity is further accentuated through a variety of security measures, including internal security at the gates, and mobile-based applications for constant patrolling and management. High-end home security systems, complete with motion sensors, added to the sense of luxury and safety. The manager explained that the app, which managed communications and rated various workers based on their performance, would easily help them find a maid, a cook, a nanny, and a driver without the need to speak to a single neighbour.

He then leads the couple to an elaborately designed sample flat - complete with furniture, pillows, linens, picture frames, flatware, candles, cookbooks and mood music. The couple is impressed with its sensory appeal and aesthetic quality. But the allure doesn't end within the confines of the community. Just next door, a newly opened mall entices with its array of shops, restaurants, and entertainment options. The mall is directly accessible from the gated enclave, amplifying the community's appeal. Here, the couple can pamper their whims of shopping, enjoying diverse culinary delights, and catching the latest blockbuster, all within a stone's throw from their new home.

Privilege Walled in: Landscapes of Exclusivity and Segregation

Apart from being a personal preference, Dev and Shruti's fascination with indulgence and exclusivity of the gated community reflects a broader cultural shift

towards hyper-capitalist values of living. This vignette shows how the allure of modern amenities and a curated lifestyle shapes contemporary housing choices. In 'City of Walls,' (Caldeira, 2000) provides a comprehensive definition of gated communities, known as 'closed condominiums' in Brazil:

'A closed condominium is a development of multiple residences, mostly high-rises, invariably walled and with security-controlled entrances, usually occupying a large area with landscaping, and including all sorts of amenities for collective use. Over the last decade, they have become the preferred residences for the wealthy. These enclaves tend to be socially homogeneous environments. People who choose to inhabit these spaces value living among selected people (considered to be of the same social group) and away from undesired interactions, movement, heterogeneity, danger, and the unpredictability of open streets'(p.258).

In the paper 'Identity and Representation of gated communities in Bangalore' the authors Chacko & Varghese (2009), highlight how the advertising of gated communities by developers is a powerful spatializing discourse that both moulds and reflects the values and ideals of society. The research examines the portrayal of lifestyle, landscape, and the built environment in ads, showing how upscale gated communities are marketed as ideal living spaces that offer not just a home, but a ready-made community.

In this obsession over image-making and exclusivity in a hyper-capitalist society, the setting of seduction to pander to the customer's fantasy of living better is of paramount importance (Bandyopadhyay, 2017). In the act of seducing potential buyers, how the builder portrays the product becomes more important than the product itself. This approach combines various aspects of homemaking - such as home building, decorating, cooking, entertaining, and social and family life - into a powerful media and merchandising domain, symbolizing luxurious lifestyles. These images act as 'persuasive lifestyle packages,' shaping people's identities (Klingmann, 2010).

It is in tandem with what Neil Leach (1999) argues in 'Anaesthetics of Architecture,' that the sensory appeal of these images numbs social and political awareness, leading to a culture of mindless consumption where meaningful discourse regarding criticality, context, historic and geographic specificity amongst others is lost. This is apparent in a recent viral video of supercars parked in a gated community in Bangalore, that

captured the fascination of social media users. The video, shared on Instagram, features a line-up of luxury cars outside houses, garnering over 4.7 million views. It highlights the appeal of luxury and opulence in India's urban landscapes (The Economic Times, 2024).

In Bangalore, the new middle-class housing ideal is epitomized by developer-driven gated communities. These estates, characterized by walls and security, create 'pockets of prosperity and islands of well-being' (Nayyar, 2012). The physical barriers and security measures also bestow status and distinction. Caldeira (2000) terms this as the 'aesthetics of security,' asserting that the more secure and enclosed these properties are, the greater their eminence. These walls, both physically and metaphorically, deepen social inequalities and reinforce the idea of the 'other.' Constructed by social norms and power structures, the 'other' refers to any individual or group perceived as different and distinct from oneself or a dominant group.

In his article 'Class Divide in a Gated Community' Chandran (2016) critiques the social dynamics within a gated enclave in Bangalore, highlighting the stark distinction between the affluent residents and the working-class staff, and some of the telling indignities subjected towards the latter. Working-class staff, including security guards, domestic workers, and maintenance personnel, are required to declare the money they are carrying when entering the gate of the building complex. When they leave, the guards tally the amount. If any of the employers pay salary, donate household items, or lend any amount to the staff, they must carry a letter stating such from their employer. This discrimination is also apparent in the use of separate passenger and service lifts and other isolating practices including being forbidden to walk on the podium-a raised area above the parking lots-between the towers. The author argues that this chasm mirrors India's deep-seated class divide, insulating the wealthy from the realities of the working class.

Vignette 2 - Sketch II

During one of Deepa's house-hunting expeditions, she met a real estate broker, proficient at traversing Bangalore's complex housing maze. With practised ease, the broker displayed on his phone's Google Maps application a shortlisted gated community's prime location. 'Just 300 meters from the metro station,' he remarked with a knowing smile, emphasizing the advantages of connectivity in the sprawling metropolis. In spite of the locale's tendency to flood and the high rent with hefty maintenance costs, the promise of anonymity

and freedom from prying neighbours was hard to resist. Deepa longed for a place where her choice to live-in with her partner is not subjected to moral scrutiny, and where their struggles with the local language, Kannada, is not a daily impediment.

The assurance of escaping the uncontrolled garbage routines of her current neighbourhood is tempting. She often finds herself chasing after the BBMP truck, garbage bags in hand, hoping they will take the mounting pile of dry leaf waste. The prospect of living in an enclave with external agencies handling waste segregation is a welcome relief.

A colleague whose parents had moved from an independent home to that gated community recounted how, during the COVID pandemic, the local Residents Welfare Association (RWA) had transformed the clubhouse into an isolation ward, brought local vendors into the community for daily vegetable shopping, eventually arranged for vaccinations and ensured that residents rarely needed to step outside the enclave.

'The place is very safe, almost like a mini-state,' the broker assured her. It has backup power and water supplies, so you'll never face the usual city hardships,' he continued. With a twinkle in his eye, he added, 'And if Bangalore ever sees another water crisis, you can always use the mall's facilities!' The quip was met with laughter, but the underlying presumption of autonomy and ease deeply resonated with Deepa.

The anticipation of a secure, hassle-free life in a lively community felt liberating. As she imagined her future in such a place, Deepa felt a surge of hope. Maybe, just maybe, they had found their new home.

Negotiating Convenience: Governance and Challenges in Bangalore's Gated Communities

Deepa's search for a home that offers anonymity and freedom - where she and her partner could live without social scrutiny - underscores the liberating promise of gated communities. Along with the convenience, order and security these enclaves provide, they significantly shape housing preferences in Bangalore. Atkinson & Blandy (2005) define gated communities as 'walled or fenced housing developments to which public access is restricted, characterized by legal agreements that tie the residents to a common code of conduct and (usually) collective responsibility for management' (p.178).

This definition identifies two key attributes: the existence of a code of conduct that governs life within the residential complex and the neighbourhood's

government, which implies particular responsibilities and rights. McKenzie (1996) emphasizes the role of homeowner's associations as the governing body in multi-unit housing complexes. Kamath and Vijayabasker (2009) note that Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) in urban India, particularly Bangalore, have emerged as key civil society actors influencing urban governance through claims on public services. They play a crucial role in legitimizing reforms that combine citizen participation with market-based service delivery under policies like the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), a central government program initiated in 2005 to improve urban infrastructure and service delivery in major Indian cities. The RWA members are resident volunteers who handle the complexities of running these 'mini-states.' They enforce codes of conduct that establish clear expectations of behaviour, provide a framework for resolving disputes, and outline the rights and responsibilities of residents. These codes uphold cleanliness, orderliness, quietness, and the maintenance of property appearance and condition, among other things.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault used the panopticon - a circular prison with cells arranged around a central tower, from which prisoners could be observed at all times - to metaphorically explore the relationship between power, knowledge and social control systems. Similarly, gated enclaves often employ panopticon-like surveillance - enabled by a large network of security cameras, recording infringements and monitoring micro-violations, to maintain order and exercise control. While the vignettes highlight the draw of gated communities, the convenience, ease and security offered, often come with trade-offs. Rigid governance structures and challenges in maintaining complex infrastructures are notable drawbacks.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, gated enclaves in Bangalore were at times dictatorial and imposing punitive measures such as hefty fines for breaking curfews or loitering without masks; aided in the materialization of the confinement measures and social control. The use of mobile apps like MyGate - a community management phone application for gated societies - allowed the RWAs to easily communicate with all residents regarding various confinement measures. Residents had to inform the society office if they tested positive so that BBMP officials could cordon off sections of the society for the well-being of others.

In some enclaves, clubhouses were repurposed as isolation wards with round-the-clock ambulance

services, nurses, and doctors available to residents (Seethalakshmi S. 2020).

Caldeira (2000) notes that closed condominiums are supposed to be self-contained worlds, theoretically insulating residents from the public life in the city. But to what extent can gated communities really be isolated from society or from the services provided by the city? Many gated communities in Bangalore rely on borewells and tankers for a steady supply of water. In March 2024, the high demand for water and low supply, as many borewells had gone dry due to a failed monsoon, drove the prices of tankers northwards to Rs.2000 for 12,000 litres of water (Bharadwaj, 2024). Residents of a posh gated community had to visit a nearby mall to use washrooms amid a severe water shortage in the city (Jain, 2024). Conversely, in May 2024, floodwater damaged twenty-two villas in a gated community in North Bangalore where the water entered many houses as the private layout did not provide infrastructure for the flow of water and sewage (Deccan Herald, 2024).

Published in a leading local newspaper, the article 'A Death, An Arrest in Bengaluru: Why Manya's Story Is a Wake-Up Call' highlights the tragic death of a nine-year-old and its broader implications for the safety and administration of residential communities in Bengaluru (Mishra, 2024). Manya was electrocuted while playing near the swimming pool in the gated enclave exposing vulnerabilities and lapses in safety within supposedly secure environments. Her story painfully highlights the pitfalls of entrusting critical community management to well-meaning but untrained and inexperienced volunteers of the RWAs. These instances demonstrate that while gated societies intend to shield residents from external chaos and risks, they are not immune to internal hazards brought about by negligence and oversight. Despite their physical separation from the broader urban landscape, these enclaves remain dependent on the city's infrastructure and services. The unintended consequences of Bengaluru's rapid urbanization often leave safety and infrastructure maintenance lagging behind development.

Vignette 3 - Sketch II

Mali and Tarun, friends of Swati and Arun from their California days encouraged them to join their gated community, a haven for NRIs like themselves. Their delineation of the enclave's architecture and lifestyle sketched a tempting picture: exposed brick villas, private gardens, and understated luxury that suited their refined aesthetics and an ideal retreat for their elderly parents' peaceful retirement.

Mali shared that many in the community sent their kids to an alternative school nearby. The neighbourhood buzzed with the chatter of school buses arriving at the gate. She assured them that life in the community would open up opportunities for friendship, playmates and extra-curriculars for their daughter. Every day at 5 pm, mothers, and children gathered in the play areas of the community; carefully designed away from the dangers of speeding cars; with snack boxes, enabling a collective spirit as children shared and exchanged treats amidst playful laughter.

Mali dramatized the community's virtual interconnectedness, with WhatsApp groups dedicated for various hobbies and interests. Residents could find almost everything they needed, from organic vegetables from a neighbour's farm to discarded cardboard boxes for DIY projects. She chuckled, recounting how a neighbour even found his missing cat lingering near the clubhouse thanks to these groups. Homemade meals, cakes, and desserts sold by enterprising homemakers made organizing birthday parties a breeze, adding to the community's elan.

Tarun added that all residents did their own composting in their backyards, and Swati could channel her environmental temper by joining the community's environmental group which met monthly to discuss and address various challenges. The members of the group, along with local authorities, had taken significant measures to clean up a nearby river. Here, bounded by lush gardens, and anchored by a social ecosystem they were bound to find the perfect combination of their transnational lifestyle and the warmth of home.

Beyond Boundaries: Redefining Community and Civic Engagement

Swati and Arun's agreement to join a community of like-minded NRIs suggests the draw of shared identity and familiarity within gated enclaves. Their narrative highlights how these enclaves are not just physical spaces but also social environments and landscapes that develop a sense of belonging and collective support. This sense of kinship and affinity in gated communities is carefully curated, mandating questions about the notion of community in these settings, the idea of inclusivity and its implications for civic life beyond the gates.

Blakely and Snyder (1997) define community as including a sense of mutual responsibility, significant interaction, and a cooperative spirit. Roitman (2010) enumerates that in the context of decreasing community in city life, gated communities appear in literature as places that encourage a sense of

community. Low (2003) describes that the idea of 'community' for residents in gated enclaves is of a specific kind that includes protecting children and keeping out crime and strangers while controlling the environment and the quality of services.

Sociological literature typically critiques gated communities for isolating residents from the broader urban life, through an overreliance on privatized services and infrastructure. The spread of gated communities is accompanied by a concern that it leads to a breakdown of civic engagement and possibly a demise of the public sphere itself (Low, 2003). Caldeira (2000) further critiques the physical and symbolic barriers of gated communities, describing their relationship with the city as one of 'rupture and denial.'

However, as a counterpoint to the typical portrayal of gated communities as disengaged residents from larger concerns, Hemangini Gupta's (2018) research reflects a broader trend among diasporic returnees who leverage their global experiences and technical expertise to initiate local environmental projects. Her research highlights how interdependencies between neighbouring communities might be uncovered by foregrounding and following non-human flows such as water and waste. Gupta notes that 'this vantage point helps exceed both popular and academic narratives of human class conflict through which the relationships between gated communities and their subaltern neighbours are typically framed.' Gupta's paper (2018) discusses an example of a gated community where residents of a gated community collaborated with their neighbouring locality to reform their waste treatment system, indicating the potential for interdependent urban administration. This shift from a privatized, detached middle-class conduct to active civic participation marks a significant transformation in urban citizenship, suggesting that these enclaves can serve as scaffoldings for broader social and environmental engagements.

Gates of Contradiction: The Multiple Realities of Gated Living

In navigating the complexities of gated communities, the stories of Dev, Shruti, Deepa, Swati and Arun reveal a convoluted mix of allure and alienation, convenience and constraint, prosperity and inequality. These vignettes lay bare not just the physical spaces people inhabit but the emotional landscapes they manoeuvre in their pursuit of Notun Ghor. By applying Fritz Steele's (1981) framework, we can perhaps perceive how these curated environments shape the contours of our social and cultural identities. As the Notun Ghor Odyssey unfolds,

it shows that the pursuit of an ideal home is charged with paradoxes, and that privacy comes at a price. The search for security, comfort, ease, and kinship often results in new forms of social stratification, thus, often detaching residents from the broader community and its inherent messiness. These stories urge us to reflect on the implications of gated living and the challenges it poses in fostering truly inclusive, ethical and safe urban communities.

Gated communities are like mini nation-states, with RWAs symbolizing the government and the residents and staff as their citizens. RWAs, like any other government, receive anger, frustrations, and disappointments, from its residents. It has the possibility to become a vehicle to explore different forms of governance with an opportunity to be inclusive, democratic, and participative. Kamath and Vijayabaskar (2008) note that studies on RWA's draw attention to their predominantly middle class and exclusive character. They also state that the 'category 'middle-class' is too homogeneous to account for multiple locations, interests, and varied access to power of different sections' (p.368). Each of these gated-enclaves needs to be analysed based on their local forces and variables.

Further Kamath and Vijayabaskar's (2008) fieldwork suggests that 'while RWAs in general have been successful in resolving local public service delivery problems, there are considerable limits to middle class collective action, both internal and external' (p.369). Gupta (2018) highlights the potential of communities to self-organize and confront challenges head-on, thereby shaping and crafting new roles and commitments to the society. In the microcosm of economically prosperous residents the test lies in balancing the perks of secure, well-managed living with the need for honest civic commitments and social responsibilities.

The Notun Ghor Odyssey is an exploration through the multiple, layered realities of contemporary urban living. It prompts us to ponder and reflect upon our aspirations and the compromises we make in our quest for the ideal new home. As we confront the paradoxes of gated communities, we are reminded of the human pursuit for belonging and the intricate interplay between identity, space, and community. By understanding these inclinations and dynamics, we can work towards creating urban environments that celebrate both individual desires and collective well-being.

Note: All names mentioned in the article are fictional.

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