Fenced In, Fenced Away: Building a good life in a gated community in Bengaluru

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Abstract

Based on four months of ethnographic fieldwork in a gated community in Bangalore (officially Bengaluru), India, this thesis investigates the good life at an elite residential site. It finds the presence of a casteless, neoliberal subjectivity that invisibilises the relationship of the individual to structural factors that bestow privilege upon and mediate the engagement of residents with the city. Noting the apolitical morality of such a subject, the thesis notes a sudden intrusion of right-wing politics into the gates and opens up space for investigating links between a privileged positionality and Hindutva.

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Introduction

I remember how the home address used to specify that our gated community was located "off Outer Ring Road" a few years ago. Turning in from a large junction that used to be in the periphery – the 'outer ring' of Bangalore city, but now a part of its IT corridor – one would have to drive along a winding road for about a kilometre, past an animal shelter designed mainly for cows (*goushala),* and a small lake perpetually overcrowded with water hyacinth, before arriving at a fork in the road. Going straight would lead us to Garudacharpalya, one of the many small villages in Bangalore's erstwhile periphery that have come to be included in the city limits and turned into mere landmarks along the long 'IT corridor' of the city, jostling for space with and often even catering to the needs of multinationals and elite gated communities. But turning leftwards, away from those overcrowded-looking buildings up ahead that mark the beginning of Garudacharpalya, one would see a large wooden gate topped with a red-tiled roof to match those of the houses within, and a sign proudly proclaiming the name of the community it guarded – Purva[1] Parkridge (PPR).

As the city outside grew and began lapping against the very edges of the gates – our road is now known as 'Goushala Road' and serves as an important route to and from the IT companies that jostle for room with PPR's walls – this exclusive gated community seemed to become increasingly inward-looking. Residents now feel 'boxed in' physically, with the tall IT buildings dwarfing the red-roofed homes that used to be visible from the main road almost a kilometre away. The rush of cabs and cab drivers catering to these buildings, and the dust that they bring

[1] 'Purva' refers to the name of the developer, Puravankara.

with them, also cause among the residents a kind of behavioural 'looking inward' that makes them want to rush past the gates to be back 'inside'.

The guards are quick to let these residents through the gate, greeting them with a salute, and sometimes even approaching the car to hand over a letter or other parcel that had been delivered in their absence. This brief exchange as they approach the gate – of respect, recognition, and familiarity – stands in sharp contrast to the messy, chaotic outside world; after navigating the woefully mismanaged traffic comprising everything from pesky two-wheelers that unpredictably flit in and out of the gaps between larger vehicles, to massive buses that make enterprising turns on narrow, potholed roads, the PPR resident breathes a sigh of relief as they turn their expensive car into the safety of their beautiful, spacious gated community. According to one resident, "quality of life outside…the infrastructure, roads, and everything – if it's two, once you enter the gate, it's a ten out of ten. Straight away."

The gated community thus represents a certain lifestyle and shelters those who buy into it, protecting them from a "two out of ten" Outside. In context of the IT boom in Bangalore, where highly educated migrants from different parts of the country come in search of well-paying corporate jobs, the tussle between tradition and modernity – a characteristic feature of studies on Indian society – takes on a unique dimension. PPR sits at and is a very specific articulation of this tension. Its residents belong to a highly collectivistic caste society on one hand, but want to reimagine themselves as worthy individuals who are competent enough to be inserted into the global flows that are concentrated in this city. As a consequence, the processes and logics at play in determining the boundaries between Inside and Outside present a unique avenue to explore the

cosmopolitan-community tension that shapes Indian cities today (Jayaram, 2017). This thesis aims to examine the various dimensions of worth and respectability politics at play in the construction of a self and surrounding that is deemed legitimate enough to comprise or gain access to the inside. What gets fenced in and what gets fenced away by the gated community as its residents go about building a good life?

Locating PPR

PPR is one among several kinds of residential enclaves that cater to highly-skilled migrants employed in the corporate sector and their varied imaginations of a good life. This gated community in particular belongs to a category of residential developments whose architecture resembles that of a wealthy American suburb, designed to attract IT professionals returning from abroad during the IT boom of the 1990s-2000s (Chacko, 2007; Chacko & Varghese, 2009). Over time, PPR has come to also cater to an upwardly mobile class of internal migrants that has experienced a degree of professional advancement and is beginning to enjoy the fruits of this achievement in the form of an increase in their economic and cultural capital. It is also important to note at this point the empirical fact of PPR's caste composition – every single resident belongs to an upper or otherwise dominant caste; there are no Dalit residents at this site. This becomes particularly noteworthy in light of the fact that PPR is located in a neighbourhood with a sizeable population of Dalits, according to the Census data (Bharathi et al., 2019).

In answering the question mentioned above, this thesis is divided into two parts. Chapter 1, comprising Part I of the thesis, focuses on outlining residents' visions of a good life that are in line with an idealised foreign lifestyle. It also proposes that the elements of such a life are

intrinsically tied to one another, and that it is more fruitful to consider them as a unified bundle comprising ideals of security, aesthetics of order and neatness, a fulfilling and idealised lifestyle, and a sense of community; these are the things that are 'fenced in'. This emic exploration of the various features that comprise a good life for residents is followed by Part II of the thesis, which aims to unpack the bundle over two chapters. Chapter 2 looks more closely at the construction of a casteless neoliberal subjectivity at this site that allows success to be conceptualised at the scale of the individual through the explicit disavowal of the collective processes of caste and class privilege; they are logically 'fenced away'. The notion of worth, articulated through the construct of merit, becomes central to this disavowal – this is also explored in reference to the merit-castelessness dynamic visible on a larger scale in India's engineering education landscape. Chapter 3 examines the continued importance of community to this collection of 'meritorious' individuals, drawing attention to the things that bring residents together and drive them apart. It hinges on the role of respectability politics in mediating – and sometimes determining the extent of – conflicts, and demonstrates how respectability becomes the balancing beam that helps residents navigate the tension between their individuality and need for community. Even as the notion of community is somewhat unevenly reformed from its traditional, communitarian associations to a more utilitarian, 'progressive' form, a certain caste logic continues to play a role in what brings people together. The apolitical subject – turning a blind eye to collective processes while still benefiting from them – thus formed becomes the focus of the conclusion, which proposes the likely future for a pro-status quo agent as it is thrust back outside the gate into the defining political moment of contemporary India.

Methodology and Limitations

Studying such a carefully guarded space and the culture it houses would ordinarily present insurmountable challenges in terms of access. However, having spent a significant part of my childhood in this gated community, coupled with the fact that my parents continue to live here, I was uniquely positioned to 'participate' at the site in the capacity of a resident – something that earlier research on gated communities has been missing (Low, 2003). Additionally, this meant that I had nearly unrestricted access to most of the spaces and people who reside in PPR; I was able to participate in the rhythms of the community over a long period of four months, engaging in everything from routine morning walks with residents as they move through the space, to the more exclusive parties hosted at individual homes, with no one batting an eyelid and moreover being able to present themselves as they ordinarily would to a neighbour.

However, this 'anthropology at home' came with significant restrictions on who and how I was able to interact with as well. Most notably, the fact that I was a resident – deemed to be one of the 'big people' as a guard put it – severely limited my ability to enter and engage with spaces inhabited by the maintenance staff and domestic workers on whose labour the community functions. My very presence on the 'backstage', where workers ate lunch, stored their supplies, or even where they were patted down at the end of their workday, felt like a violent act of transgression. While this limited my ability to produce a more well-rounded account of PPR as a whole, it did sharpen my focus, allowing me to engage more deeply with the residents and their 'side' of the inequality that the gated community represents. At the same time, I was unable to interact with certain residents, make note of certain conversations, or ask more probing questions in certain settings – sometimes at the request of my family or out of consideration for their

relationship with neighbours. However, owing to my long-term association with the site, I have been able to reflect upon not only what I observed while 'on the field', but also on my own lived experience over a longer period of time. This has allowed for what I hope is a fuller account of the privileged side of the logic of inequality represented by PPR. The thesis is therefore a deeply personal attempt to examine some of the tensions and contradictions that shape the good life in urban India.

PART 1 – Good Life Bundle

Chapter 1: What is the Good Life Bundle

My fieldwork did not start well. As I started to interview residents, I continued to encounter a dogged insistence that this gated community represented little else apart from a beautiful space in which residents could live their best lives. Frustrated with the throwaway statements on the 'beauty' and 'neatness' of the space from residents who seemed hard-pressed to identify any deeper meaning that characterised their relationship with the community I asked a long-term resident over an informal cup of tea what she thinks binds residents together and what they have in common. She looked at me quizzically, before taking a languid sip from her cup. "A good life – or the quest for one," she finally answered.

This seemed to many a fairly obvious summation of why anybody might choose to take up residence in a gated community. And yet, it struck a chord with me, and the initially disparate-looking material I had gathered – one interviewee even commented that I was asking questions about 'everything' and seemed to have no end goal – suddenly appeared more meaningful through this frame. What makes this statement valuable is that it serves as a starting point to examine a life of privilege and its underlying logic more closely, through things that are both included and excluded in this 'good life' frame that residents have. Additionally, it highlights the dual aspect of the lifestyle I observed in PPR – as both an aspiration and an everyday practice. Let us see what this translated to in actuality.

Every evening, the streets of PPR come alive. Residents of all ages trickle out from their houses, the children arguing over which Pokemon is most powerful or cycling along to one of their many after-school classes, while their parents walk briskly to get in their daily 10,000 steps as they catch up with friends. Some people walk their dogs, stopping when they pass by a neighbour's familiar face or a child who wants to pet the dog. The pace slows a little with the older residents – the recent retirees and grandparents – who stroll along with a friend, partner, or helper, sometimes headed to a meeting spot at the clubhouse where the security guards keep plastic chairs ready in a circle for the senior citizens to gather and swap the latest news. Regardless of how they choose to spend their time, these daily excursions allow residents to take in the pleasant environs of their gated community. The cooling breeze rustling through the palm trees lining the broad streets, laced with the occasional sound of children playing, provides a much-needed respite from the dusty, noisy outside world.

> **L**: It's just wow for me (*chuckles*).Yeah, *wow* for me especially after coming from busy traffic (outside), and – I will just wait to see my building, and then I feel, oh I am in my safe comfort zone. So, so refreshing. You don't feel like stepping out. In fact…all my friends who have come from Mumbai or something, we all decide, okay, let's go out. They said we just don't want to step out from PPR. Because that's the feeling they get. They said, you don't (even) need to stay in a resort. It's so quiet (here), away from that noise, so peaceful. So that's the same feeling we get. Very nice. When you come (inside), there's all positive vibes here in this whole community actually. When we walk also – everybody walks (inside the gates) with so much of comfort. They say hi, y'know, just meeting others they say hi. It's very positive and very healthy…and not only that, even our security guards, from our housekeeping to our security guards, whoever we are interacting with in the community, there is a safe, a safe zone. Because even, forget about the residents, it's also important how these security guards are. So when you see that, there is that bonding. A trust we have with the housekeeping and security and all that.

This excerpt from a conversation with L – a school administrator and mother-of-two in her late 40s – was particularly effective at highlighting how the experience of the gated community's beauty bleeds easily into other criteria that determine residents' perception of their quality of life; the physicality of the space not only serves as an effective counter to the experience of a stressful

outside world but also carries a sense of comfort and community which gets intertwined with a feeling of safety.

A, another resident – a father of two and a 'story coach' by profession who quit his job in advertising to start a business that helps businesses tell 'better stories' – was more explicit about which features of the space appealed to him. With a flourish of his hands, he indicated the road running perpendicular to his house, citing its width and the attendant feeling of open space as why it's one of his favourite parts of the neighbourhood. "That's (also) where everybody gathers, that's where you *meet* people," he said, in another illustration of how the physicality of the space carries both an aesthetic value as well as facilitating a sense of community. Like L above, this resident also went on to highlight how the presence of the outside continues to frame his experience of the inside, and how it informs the way he perceives and moves through the space:

> **A**: I also like walking in your lane[2], and the reason for that is – as against going towards the main gate, because the closer you go towards the main gate the more pollution you feel in the air. The air quality *changes*, uh, if you're closer to the main gate versus if you're at your place.

When speaking about what makes his life as a gated community resident indeed 'good', A was quick to point out his large garden – not for its greenery, but for the space it provided. Simply having access to that kind of space, he said, was a marker of a good life that distinguished PPR from other kinds of private housing (like apartments) in more congested cities like Mumbai; inequality, to him, was multifaceted, not simply about having the financial means to afford a place but also about where in the country a free-floating professional lands up. He also went on

[2] in our conversations, residents would often make reference to me and my family with great ease and familiarity. Sometimes, this led to a candidness built upon a shared vocabulary, or a shared repository of references. In this instance, the interviewee is talking about the part of the gated community where my parents' house is located, which is fairly tucked in and far from the main gate as he highlights.

to explain how during the pandemic his family was able to convince their long-term cook (who used to live with them till a few years ago) to move back in so they would have the luxury of having hot meals ready for their large family at any point in the day. "So…what is the good life?," he asked, echoing the question I had posed to him – "That during the pandemic when most people don't have maids, you have one at home," he said, attributing their ability to invite the cook to stay to the space they had available. I did not comment on his strange phrasing – of 'people having maids' and 'having *one* at home' (emphasis added) – and he didn't seem to notice the implication that extended subjecthood to residents of private housing in other cities while somehow eluding the person invited to share their house. This was a discursive exclusion – or fencing away – of a certain kind of people performing the labour that keeps PPR's good life running. I soon came to realise that such gaps and absences in what the residents said were equally if not more meaningful, especially when it came to understanding how they viewed their relationship to collective processes and caste-based privilege that facilitated their access to the good life in the first place. This dynamic will be further explored in Part II.

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In his article 'Beyond the Suffering Subject', Joel Robbins (2013) presents his case for a new disciplinary direction – an anthropology of the good – which would explore the ways in which people organise their lives in order to foster what they think is 'good'. He argues that moving past the 'suffering subject' and accounting for this 'good' is essential for reclaiming the capacity that anthropology has of studying the human condition in its full range of complexity – what he refers to as "bringing culture back" into anthropology. By proposing three groups of inquiry – namely the way good is understood or imagined, how the good is maintained in social relations,

and construing the good as a genuine possibility that can be actualized – Robbins presents a roadmap of what an anthropology of the good may look like.

In some ways, this thesis can be read as being aligned with Robbins' proposition, as it touches upon all three dimensions of his roadmap to some degree. However, the radical hopefulness of this proposition does not sit very well with what I found during my fieldwork; it seems like an anthropology of the good in highly unequal cities such as Bangalore may run the risk of obscuring the role of oppressive structures like caste, especially if we rely on the emic descriptions of the good life without critically examining what the imagination or enactment of such an ideal does in real terms. Perhaps this section that expounds upon the good life as imagined by PPR's residents, and the subsequent chapters that unpack this good life in relation to the collective logic operating at this site, will help clarify my position on Robbins.

Based on accounts of gated communities across the world, the good life seems fundamentally ephemeral, its meaning liable to change not only with individual preference, but with social and geographical context as well. In Low's (2003) examination of gated communities in the U.S., for example, social homogeneity and a nostalgic sense of community emerge as important features for a good quality of life among residents (among other things). Caldeira's (2000) analysis in Brazil, however, reveals an aversion to the discursive ideal of a community even while social homogeneity is appreciated in elite housing. Despite this resistance to uniform definitions, however, there are some similarities in what comprises a good life for gated community residents across contexts; references to beauty, safety, amenities for leisure, and the notion of 'having space' emerge in academic and documentary accounts from California and Texas to São Paulo

and Rio de Janeiro (Mascaro, 2009). As we have seen above, these ideals are echoed in PPR as well; the beauty of the wide, open roads and greenery contribute to a resort-like experience, where parents let their children out of the house without fear and the air gets cleaner the further away from the Outside you are. In the meantime, one is free to pursue their niche professional lives, fitness goals, and lively social lives in a disciplined and focused manner, while their meals and housework are taken care of by familiar, salaried others who form a part of their "safe zone" without necessarily forming part of their community.

This ephemerality, however, serves to illustrate the multidimensional nature of the good life at the site of the gated community. The rest of this section demonstrates the strands of security, aesthetic, and lifestyle embedded in such a life, and the manner in which they are inextricably interwoven together in a bundle.

Let me start my analysis by talking about security, in recognition of the central position it has occupied in earlier work on gated communities (Caldeira, 2000; Low, 2003).

Safety was in fact a recurring theme across my interactions in PPR, considered so obvious by residents that they often did not elaborate on what they meant by it. When probed further, there were references to a general feeling of uneasiness that residents experienced when passing through the village of Garudacharpalya right outside, with its chaotic traffic, its population of migrant workers, memories of a drug problem in the village from many years ago, and the "shady" liquor shops that attract large groups of working-class men in the evenings. With its walls, gates, and security guards, PPR felt much safer to residents, who used words such as

‘cocoon’, ‘oasis’, and ‘walled garden’ to describe their community. Residents with daughters were especially appreciative of the sense of safety that PPR seemed to provide, referring to how they don’t have to worry when their children take walks late in the evening thanks to the guards and gates, or even if they have to be left alone at home overnight. In the case of younger children, residents spoke of employing trustworthy women as nannies and domestic workers around whom they ‘felt safe’ leaving their children, or in cases where care work was not outsourced, how neighbours step in to watch the children if the parents were unable to get home in time. The sense of safety thus emerges as being multidimensional, tied to a sense of community fostered among neighbours and bonds of trust with staff, as much as it is about the security infrastructure of guards, gates, and CCTV surveillance.

What really stuck with me was the genericness of this sense of safety that characterised PPR in residents’ minds, and how closely safety was constructed around the perception of unsafety outside. It is also worthwhile to note that not one of the people I spoke with mentioned a personal brush with crime in the village outside – although a few residents did express surprise after learning that I walk through Garudacharpalya frequently, urging me to stay cautious. A major part of this discomfort and perception of unsafety outside seemed rooted in the fundamental unknowability of the village, its narrow streets and crowded buildings representing to the residents’ minds the very unpredictability of the society they were trying to retreat from and keep outside. Thus, this generalised sense of safety also seemed to be tied to a spatial aesthetics as made clear by L and A. PPR is built on straight lines, the broad arterial road branching off into smaller cul-de-sacs, lined with neat cookie-cutter houses whose inhabitants are at least familiar if not well known, recognised as part of the community they belong to.

This is echoed in Caldeira's (2000) ethnography of São Paulo as well. There she shows how the integration of security features such as front yards and fences into the architecture of newer buildings emerged as a marker of status, in line with how wealthier groups had started designing their homes. Following this new code of distinction, improvements to the neighbourhood in working-class contexts would sometimes take the form of adding fences and other features in order to make it more 'beautiful'. Curious about the interplay of beauty, order, and security at my site, I asked L's husband, an interior designer trained in Italy, what he thought of the layout and design choices of PPR. Did he think the aesthetic, evocative as it was of an American suburb, had any role in the appeal of this gated community? "No no," he said, with a dismissive shake of his head, "it's because it's just neat, cleanly laid, you know, straight lines. It's a styling basically that's very contemporary." He then went on to talk about other gated communities where their friends live, where the aesthetic was "very ethnic" and "traditional" – places designed with exposed brick instead of the white stucco of PPR, and the incorporation of traditional design elements like colourful flooring tiles and warm wood tones as opposed to the standard-issue botticino marble flooring in PPR's villas. According to L's husband, what mattered at the end of the day for a gated community was that it was green, neat, and peaceful.

It is worth reiterating here that such aspects of greenery, peace, and orderliness are valuable to residents precisely because they are perceived as lacking in the rest of the city; the sensory experience of the inside is given meaning through its juxtaposition with the outside. But this does not mean that the stark aesthetic choice of designing a gated community to look decidedly

foreign has no meaning by itself. The resemblance PPR bears to the American suburb is not coincidental. It belongs to a class of gated communities that were designed to attract IT professionals returning from abroad, specifically during and immediately after the IT boom that Bangalore experienced during the 90s (Chacko, 2007; Chacko & Varghese, 2009). Speaking with some of its long-term residents reveals this precise dynamic. M, a successful IT professional-turned entrepreneur who spent several years living in Canada, spoke of how her family's decision to stay in PPR was as much about a sense of familiarity with the space as it was about the sense of community they found. She described PPR as being a piece of Canada in India, its cookie-cutter houses still conducive to a culture of interdependence among neighbours which they had missed abroad, along with the added perks such as being able to afford domestic workers. In her case, PPR's design was not simply about the 'straight lines' and mere neatness that L's husband spoke about, but its wide roads, lawns, and white-stucco structures were actively reminiscent of the life they had built abroad. For some others who had never lived abroad, this feature of PPR was attractive as well, representing an aspirational foreign lifestyle especially when seen in conjunction with other aspects such as 'having space' and finding a sense of community.

Building a good life thus emerges as a multidimensional undertaking. Seen in isolation, these dimensions might seem merely like disjointed indicators – the presence of guards, having outdoor space, beautiful surroundings, and a sense of community. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that these experiences are bundled together in practice, effectively quite inextricable from each other; feelings of safety are interlocked with the experience of a beautiful Inside, which only feels like home when there is a familiar sense of community which

in turn contributes to the "safe zone". I call this the good life bundle, which highlights not only the interwoven boundedness of the markers of a good life, but also points to how they usually seem to come in a package. I also like to think that the words residents use to describe PPR, such as 'resort', 'walled garden', and 'oasis' also illustrate their view of how the good life comes to them in such a bundle.

1.1 From bundle to comfort: PPR and upward mobility

The strong association with a foreign lifestyle also makes this category of gated communities in Bangalore appealing to an upwardly-mobile class of Indian citizens who often move to the city after accepting a job at a multinational corporation. While residents like M do find a sense of familiarity in PPR, a number of residents I interacted with have not in fact lived abroad previously. Many of them come from smaller towns in India, and were attracted to Bangalore due to its diversity and cosmopolitan outlook, or found that they enjoyed it after moving to the city for work.

For A and his wife – who were both advertising professionals at the time – moving to Bangalore was initially a professional decision, but they grew to love the city because of how different it was from the small towns they had grown up in. The experience was not only liberating and exciting due to Bangalore's proximity to global capital flows, but also represented a 'fresh start' for them. This was important as theirs was an interfaith relationship that faced significant backlash from both their families and the tightly-knit social circles of their hometowns. While the families eventually got on board and are now fairly supportive of the relationship, A and his

wife V both individually attributed their ability to establish their lives on their own terms to the decision to live in Bangalore.

Moving into PPR was a decision prompted in part by their growing family. As a young couple, they lived in a flat in the central part of the city, but started looking for a larger place after the birth of their first child. "Once you get into a gated community, you never move out of a gated community…you move from one to another as your house becomes bigger," said V, citing the social life, safety, and easy access to services like having a plumber on call or the network of domestic workers which makes it easy to hire them. For V and A, PPR is part of a natural progression in their lives – from a small city to a bigger one, and from a flat to a villa as their family and professional stature both grew.

Bundled with the physical space and amenities is also an upgradation of their lifestyle. This family places immense emphasis on their worldliness, their progressive outlook, and on their participation in and consumption of culture. In an informal conversation before the interview, A asked me about my project with great enthusiasm, making reference to a few books he had read by Indian anthropologists on symbols and mythology and expressed the desire to have a 'long-winded academic chat' with me. Dressed in a linen *kurti*[3] on the day of the interview, he explained how his family's engagement with the city was based on 'cultural activities' such as visiting the theatre and various music clubs. This, he said, was part of the benefits of living in the cosmopolitan area of Bangalore that attracted high-income migrants, making reference to the fact that most of his closest friends are people he has met in PPR who have lived abroad previously.

[3] *Kurti* is a type of short Indian tunic. In elite urban settings, *kurtis* made with materials like linen or cotton are often used to signal affiliation with artistic circles or lifestyles; seeing someone in a *kurti* stroll through an airport crowded with IT professionals in formalwear, for example, would set them apart.

This network has even facilitated many of his professional endeavours, with his highly-placed friends helping him find investors and offering him storytelling projects at several multinationals. The upgraded lifestyle thus comes with significant social and cultural capital, and a sense that one can finally enjoy life.

This entrenched enjoyment that seemed to permeate the everyday lives of PPR's residents stood in something of a contrast to an insecurity that I had been expecting to see. Both Low (2003) and Caldeira (2000) locate a sense of elite insecurity in their respective contexts; for residents in São Paulo, it is the talk of crime coupled with a desire to turn inwards, away from a violent city, while Low locates the insecurity in a combination of the perception of crime due to racialised cultural stereotypes as well as the American economic restructuring in the 1980s. Concerns about physical safety and economic backsliding thus form a core reason for why people choose to wall themselves off; gated communities thus become a mechanism to pin down and protect the good lives they build. The exclusive spaces thus created, with their deliberate, orderly beauty and their social homogeneity of upper-middle class families not only ensures insulation from other kinds of (threatening) people but also validates the social status of an upwardly-mobile aspiration.

The gated community of PPR also reflects some of these considerations of exclusivity, but without it tipping over into being a matter of concern. To residents like A and his family, PPR fundamentally represents an upward mobility that is also characterised by comfort. This comfort has multiple dimensions – financial stability (described by many that I spoke to as 'being comfortable'), physical comfort as embodied in 'having space', and the psychological dimension of being able to live 'peacefully' and enjoy respite from the noise and concerns of the outside

world. Despite the fact that several residents come from smaller towns or have even grown up in conditions that were not as financially 'comfortable', none of the conversations revealed any insecurity of slipping backwards or losing status. Buying into PPR, in particular, not only cements their upward mobility, but also seems to be a celebration of their new financial stability and social status rather than an attempt to preserve status premised on insecurity as was the case in Low's and Caldeira's respective fields.

This lack of insecurity – or the celebration and a sense of coming into one's own that permeates the sensibility of PPR – leads to what several newcomers described as a generally welcoming atmosphere. N, who works in the field of data analytics and data science and is employed by a financial corporation, was elected to the residents' managing committee within a few months of moving in.

> **N**: I mean, *very* quickly, touch wood, uh, within a month or so of moving here I'd made quite some good friends…so when I stood up that day – when they said who wants to nominate themselves (for the committee) – I said ok, my husband is pushing me, my friends are there, so I stood up. And I could see people clapping. *Welcoming*. And I'm like 'ooh not bad!' So people, y'know, recognised me, and it's been only couple of months since I'd moved.

N is one among a large number of newcomers, and is well respected in the community already, resembling something of a leader among the newer residents. Present at every community event, she also balances a full-time job with art classes for residents of various ages several times a week, in addition to her responsibilities as a committee member. She was the only person who wanted to speak outside her living room, inviting me to the benches at the clubhouse instead; our conversation was punctuated by residents and workers alike nodding or waving to her, some even coming up to her for a quick word. N was quick to point out to me that she and her husband

already owned two other homes in different parts of the city, and that they had initially bought a house in PPR with the intention of renting it out. Over the course of the discussion, however, it became apparent that living here still represented an upgrade of sorts – PPR's wide roads and balconies resembled the townships that she had grown up in as the daughter of a government employee, besides providing a rare tranquillity in the city that kept out the sound of the traffic unlike her previous homes. PPR was also closer to her workplace and the children's school, as opposed to their earlier residence which was located in the newer, messier periphery of the city.

While the sense of community and familiarity that PPR affords makes some residents want to stay back and even retire here, it seems to represent a mere moment in the overall trajectory of upward mobility. As the property grows older and new gated communities with an upgraded aesthetic and better amenities come about, some of the residents feel the need to move out. One resident cited the poor infrastructure and need for constant upgradation as the reason for wanting a new home with a developer that uses better materials, while another old-timer added that she feels a growing sense of distance with the community due to the newcomers. "You don't even recognise anyone on the road!" she exclaimed, while citing an age difference with new residents who had younger children as an additional reason for the disconnect. Both of these individuals are looking to buy a house with larger square footage with the developer that L's husband referred to as having a more "ethnic" and "traditional" aesthetic. This developer has recently garnered a reputation as catering to an even more elite clientele, launching a jazz club and brewery as part of their newer residential projects. On a visit to this jazz club that had invited a foreign artist to play that evening, I felt slightly out of place among the well-dressed crowd in my simple black t-shirt and jeans, and yet derived some comfort from the knowledge that I was here

in the capacity of an anthropologist as I browsed the tastefully stacked bookshelves that lined its walls. Books on corporate management jostled for space with attractive coffee table books and some selected historical non-fiction titles, and I was reminded of A's curated bookshelf that was filled with similar books usually gifted by his friends in the art and advertising world.

The reason for moving out of PPR seems to be based on a realisation that they may have outgrown this community, either in terms of age or other markers of seniority and status such as being 'empty nesters' who have sent their children abroad to study. The move away from PPR (for those who remain in Bangalore) is always into another gated community, but often one that has a more elite status. The aesthetic of the American suburb may have been a feature attracting residents in the immediate aftermath of the IT boom, but now holds little value apart from the resort-like neatness and experience of open space that its wide lawns afford.

This emic exploration of the good life bundle, its connection to upward mobility, and how it facilitates and represents a multidimensional comfort has provided an overview of what residents like to keep fenced in. But why does a good life present in this specific manner at this site? What are the larger processes undergirding the aesthetic and personal choices of PPR's residents, and is there a collective dimension to the logic that keeps some things in while fencing others away? Part II of this thesis will aim to answer some of these questions by examining certain aspects of the good life bundle more closely.

PART 2 – Unpacking the Bundle

Chapter 2: Merit, Castelessness, and the Competence of the Neoliberal Subject

Key to unpacking the good life bundle is recognising the logic that underlies the lifestyle choices and ideals of aspiration among PPR's residents. This chapter continues to look at interview excerpts and other material gathered on the field, but analyses it in relation to the construct of merit and the notion of castelessness, the interconnections between which have been successfully deployed in showing a continuity from caste-based communitarian frames to individual ones in broader national contexts (Deshpande, 2013; Subramanian, 2019; Teltumbde, 2018). Central to this continuity is an ignoring of caste privilege – the economic, cultural, and social capital held by upper-caste families – in the avenues for educational and professional success available to individuals. This sidelining of the collectivistic identity and its benefits is only possible through the creation of a neoliberal subjectivity that visualises success at the scale of the individual. PPR is also thus a site where this vision of the individual is prioritised.

The chapter begins with a discussion of this neoliberal individual in the first section, linking the emphasis on competitiveness and marketability of skills to the idea of being 'meritorious'. Given that 'merit' is a loaded term, the first section of this chapter also aims to contextualise merit in the landscape of Indian engineering institutions where the term is both historically located and continues to be most widely used. Understanding merit also reveals to us the presence of caste, and the intertwined nature of caste privilege and castelessness. Investigating caste in context of merit subsequently becomes the task of this chapter's second section, which takes forward the

idea of merit and proposes a certain plasticity of the term as it gets deployed in the gated community context. The continued relevance of the merit idea beyond the bounds of engineering education – and specifically in India's elite gated communities – demonstrates how caste privilege continues to operate even through attempts to invisibilize it; the silence around caste among residents, and the disavowal of its privilege when directly asked about it, thus speaks louder in its absence.

2.1 Manufacturing Merit

Amenities for leisure and opportunities for investing in oneself are important aspects of the lifestyle PPR offers, and where ideas of the individual are made visible. I signed up for a painting class taught by the newcomer N in order to engage with this dimension more deeply. While the classes usually took place at the clubhouse, a scheduling error one week meant that N invited us over to her house instead. As eight of us women jostled for room at her dining table, one of N's children called to her from upstairs, and she yelled back curtly, telling him to focus on his online class. "Oh extra tuition?" I asked, glancing in surprise at the clock which showed that it was 6pm. "No no, this is coaching," she said, explaining that she had signed him up for classes that taught public speaking and other 'soft skills' that were important for the job market. Nodding politely to disguise my confusion at an eleven-year-old being prepared for employment in this manner, I asked if there were any other classes he attended, and learnt that he was also enrolled in badminton and robotics courses. "You have to keep them busy, otherwise they'll just waste time. Better to have them prepare," she said, chuckling. We were interrupted by the loud doorbell just then, which was set to the tune of a *bhajan* (Hindu hymn). It was N's ten-year-old daughter, who slid into the room shyly as the last refrain of the *bhajan* faded away, and the other women at

the table – all mothers, barring me – asked her if her class went well. I must have looked bewildered, since N started explaining that her daughter attended Bharatnatyam (classical dance) classes at the clubhouse. Smiling proudly, she then pulled out a folder of her daughter's paintings to show me, and one of the other women commented that the daughter was truly N's best student.

Such an overcrowded schedule has come to be seen as a sign of good parenting for many in PPR, a way to ensure their children have the broadest possible set of skills that would give them an edge over potential competitors in their college applications, internships, and eventually the job market. Among residents, it is expected that parents will leave no stone unturned towards the provision of the best opportunities for their children and will leverage their significant social capital and wealth to do so; this push is seen by residents as the most natural, obvious course of action. Thus, many see the access to so many extracurricular classes in a gated community as being not only a marker of their own good life, but also as an investment in their child's future, a setting-up for a future good life. This is of course in addition to the fact that children are sent to schools perceived to be the best by some criteria. If the plan is for the child to stay on in India or study science, they are sent to one of the 'best schools' following Indian curricula like CBSE or ICSE, and to schools offering A-levels or the IB if the child's interests are a little more esoteric or the ambition is to go abroad. In this emphasis that parents lay on excellence, often pushing their children to engage in multiple extracurriculars on top of their schoolwork, two things become clear. First, that the individual is the scale at which success is conceived and enacted. And second, that a very specific notion of worth – revolving around the right kind of education, language skills, employability, and athletic or artistic ability – emerges as central to this success.

To make their children worthy, parents go to great lengths. At a badminton tournament organised for children, I happened to overhear a conversation between the opponents' mothers. Walking up to her with a big smile and congratulating the other on her son's victory, the mother of the runner-up began to praise the victor's dedication and improvement, and let the other gush proudly for a bit. She then began to slide in questions about where he is sent for badminton classes – "does he take coaching from the Sir who comes here? No?" – peppered with intermittent praise for the boy, until the smile gradually faded from her face and she began to ask rapid-fire questions about his training schedule ("how do you push him to run for *hours* every morning?") and the best coaches in the city. The victor's mother took a barely-perceptible half-step back and fielded each question to the best of her ability, before putting an end to the off-court volley with a polite comment about how it's very hard work ferrying kids to classes across the city but parents must do what they can. The other agreed, smile back on her face, commenting neutrally about how the excellence of their children is worth the investment.

With court-side adrenaline running high, this exchange brought to the surface just how seriously parents take their children's success, how responsible they feel for it, and the pressure that is put on the children as well to outcompete others. At the same time, there is an acknowledgement for this need in the gated community; be it the mothers around N's dining table providing gentle encouragement to her daughter and nodding along when N expressed the need to 'keep them busy', or the exchange at the badminton court where the importance of the conversation's contents temporarily overrode the impulse to 'be nice'. This delicate interplay of self-interest and politeness simultaneously recognises the individual as a self-contained, aspiring, and competent

unit, and paves the way for an ecosystem of mutual support for it, forming the basis of an upwardly-mobile community. This dynamic, and how it is navigated through respectability politics, will be further explored in Chapter 3.

Before discussing the community, let us redirect focus to individuals for the moment. What characterises this construct of the individual, and why is it so central to the notion of success at this site? Success itself is important because of the nature of the gated community as something that represents the good life and marks a point in the trajectory of upward mobility as discussed in Chapter 1. Given the position of Bangalore as a 'big city' – a major node in global capital flows, notably through its IT industry – it attracts highly skilled migrants from 'small towns' all over the country. While some recent migrants and younger IT professionals I spoke to do aspire to live in communities like PPR, it is only after a degree of professional advancement in the corporate world and the attendant growth in personal savings that people are able to buy into elite living spaces, which in cases like PPR are even designed to resemble a foreign lifestyle. This lifestyle automatically aligns with and thus reinforces the city's connection to the West – or the ideal of being 'global'. This is also a major aspect of what makes the city attractive to people who had initially moved here only because they got a job in an IT company or affiliated industry; the city's cosmopolitan atmosphere and an affinity for distinctly Western 'high' culture of jazz clubs and breweries were among the top reasons residents cited for liking Bangalore, especially when compared to other parts of India. Buying into PPR is thus a way for its (prospective) residents to cement their own closeness to that ideal of cosmopolitan success. Meanwhile, the individual is the scale at which such success is conceived and measured, and individual

professional success is what PPR both rewards and nurtures, nestled as it is in the capital flows emerging from Bangalore's position in the globalised IT economy.

It should not be surprising then that competition – framed as relative competence – is what characterises the individual at this site. With the worth of the individual being framed in terms of their ability to 'compete', the market – through a preoccupation with jobs, getting a seat in the 'best' school, and possessing a wide range of non-academic skills – seems to make its presence felt in the everyday worldview of PPR's residents. Moreover, this displays a genuine belief in the neutrality of the market; it is not rigged in anybody's favour, and thus the only way to be successful is to improve your own capability. This seems to resonate quite strongly with Foucault's ideas on the individual as both acted upon by and as an agent of neoliberal governmentality, also bringing into question how neutral or removed from structural influences (such as caste) this market really is (Foucault, 2007, 2010). Without delving too far into the endlessly fascinating debates and counter-debates emerging from Foucault's lectures on biopolitics and security, it might suffice here to highlight two things – first, that the emphasis shifts from protecting individual freedom to protecting the market itself in the neoliberal economy, and second, that the conception of the free market shifts from being founded upon the principle of free exchange to one of unequal competition. Additionally, the market emerges as central to evaluating the legitimacy of the state (more so in some strands of neoliberalism than others, according to Foucault's diagnosis), hence there is further emphasis on protecting the freedom of the market even artificially through intervention in non-market social realms. Taken together, this means that participation in the market is tied to notions of worth, and that the onus for making this participation successful often falls upon the individual. This individual –

simultaneously providing labour to the neoliberal economy and keeping themselves afloat in it through consumption – thus is reconstituted into an entrepreneurial subject that must outcompete other individuals in order to stay relevant, and to achieve any degree of satisfaction or fulfilment through both labour and consumption (Audier & Behrent, 2015; Behrent, 2013; Foucault, 2010; Scheider, 2020).

This dynamic of the individual as the scale at which success and worth is conceived in a neoliberal economy is clear enough at the site of PPR. It is also important to note that this site is additionally embedded in the Indian context, where neoliberal notions of worth interact with the social structure of caste to produce a distinctive governing logic. Before looking at how caste plays out in PPR, it may be more fruitful to understand merit and its relationship to castelessness in the broader Indian context. In her book 'The Caste of Merit', Subramanian (2019) discusses this relationship and how it works to produce a unique knowledge economy that is built upon the assigning of worth to individuals without accounting for the significant social and cultural capital conferred by caste that has brought them there. Just as meritocracy in the US invisibilises economic advantage and a degree of social capital in forwarding a myth of achievability based on a moral sense of worth (Sandel, 2020), the construct of merit in India obscures caste capital – a combination of cultural and social capital, together with the historical advantage of representation and a general aura of legitimacy often buttressed by generational wealth (Anurag Minus Verma, n.d.; Jodhka & Naudet, 2019). The construct of merit is pivotal in Subramanian's analysis, and is given a historical and political weight through her careful examination of both the context and the current processes that characterise India's elite engineering colleges and constitute them as upper-caste spaces. Merit emerges as not only the result of accumulated caste

capital, but also as an indicator of legitimacy. Her chapter on ‘testing merit’ problematizes the notion that the nationwide competitive entrance exams facilitate a shift from ascriptive to achieved status, showing us how standardised testing simply invisibilizes (dis)advantage rather than genuinely levelling the playing field. In engineering colleges and the professional networks they rely on, this results in an automatic privileging of existing privilege that takes the form of likeability and ‘soft skills’ in addition to the status of candidates as being ‘reserved’ or ‘unreserved’.

A conversation with a recent engineering graduate – a young IT professional who aspires to one day live in a gated community like PPR – brought additional clarity to this legitimacy associated with ‘merit’. Talking about recruitment into the most elite student club on campus (the English club) of which he was the head at one point, he told me about several selection rounds designed to evaluate not only an applicant’s command over English, but also other aspects of their personality such as taste in books and an ability to hold their own in arguments. On the topic of enjoying the company of a bright set of colleagues, he also made reference to how the “bottom 33%” who are there through reservations are “not really worth comparing” to the rest. This clinical dismissal of entire swaths of people might seem exaggerated, but is not altogether unique among engineering students who have been trained to survive in the highly competitive job market. It also illustrates with great clarity the ease with which a recognition of cultural capital – already a sign of existing privilege – bleeds into notions of worthiness and leads to further privileging of these individuals for opportunities both on and off or beyond campus (‘38% IITians yet to Be Placed This Year, IITs Reach out to Alumni Network’, 2024). Anti-caste scholars have repeatedly drawn attention to how these forms of capital translate to an ‘intangible

smoothness' that signals their status to other upper-caste professionals, leading to inherently exclusionary hiring and networking practices across industries that seek out similar people with the right cultural markers (Anurag Minus Verma, n.d.; Kisana, 2020; Samos, 2022).

2.2 Castelessness and the plasticity of merit

The notion of castelessness is fundamental to understanding constructions of uppercasteness and the invisibilization of caste privilege today. Deshpande's (2013) seminal work that reflects on the 'general category' – a word used to denote upper castes that do not need reservation – presents this notion of castelessness as fundamental to understanding how caste works in contemporary India as it interacts with the colonial and post-colonial histories of Indian politics. He points out that the emergence of the 'casteless' individual was only possible as a result of the advent of the neutral 'citizen' category in political discourse; not having to declare their upper-caste identity in the manner of oppressed castes, this 'general category' could more easily lay claim to cosmopolitan citizenship in a modern republic. More concretely, the now 'neutral' citizen no longer had to rely on explicit recourse to caste identity for benefits; "caste-qua-caste…represents a ladder that can now be safely kicked away" in favour of cosmopolitan identity (p. 32).

This section is an attempted response to Deshpande's call to study the various modalities of upper-caste identity as they "add up to that abstract term: 'merit'" (p. 39). The worthiness of the individual and its link to neoliberal subjectivity has been explored in the previous section, and now our task is to examine the aspect of castelessness underlying this merit construct, specifically as it operates at the site of PPR.

I found that caste is not an easy subject to broach in this gated community. When asked about the presence of caste here, people straighten their backs as the smile fades from their face. They suddenly become guarded, bewildered that I would ask such a question and defensive in anticipation of an accusation of casteism. Sometimes, they laugh it off, dismissing the presence of caste and casteism and reasserting PPR's casteless image. So, I learned to soften the blow when first broaching the subject, slipping in a question about whether they know of any SC-ST[4] residents among their neighbours. Posing this question to L and her husband earned me a rather curt response – "we don't know, we don't care" – which sums up how most residents responded. On the other hand, A, with his interest in anthropology and 'academic chats' (see Chapter 1) was something of an outlier. As one of the few Muslim residents of the community, I also hoped that his answer would be different from the usual appeals to castelessness that hinge upon the default upper-caste Hindu identity.

> **A**: Uh, y'know, we don't look at people through that lens and try to find out…But we do look down at certain people - for sure!
>
> **Interviewer**: Such as?
>
> **A:** Such as the R- family. So, we, we laugh at them, don't we? We make jokes of them, don't we? In your house, and in my house, and in many homes. So, we do practise, uh, that casteism in a very different way. Particularly against the Rs (*laughs*). But, uh what kind of casteism, right? If you look at that, y'know, it's about status acquired through money, rather than through (long pause) uh, education. So, the path of Saraswati[5] is very – we associate higher, uh, caste values to anybody who's acquired that status through Saraswati rather than through hard work. Rs also do a lot of hard work. Uh, but that's come through more Lakshmi[6] associations rather than Saraswati associations. So we, we make fun of that. That's also a certain kind of casteism, isn't it? (*chuckles, munches on snack*)
> **Interviewer**: (*chuckling uncomfortably*) Right, yeah, yeah.
>
> **A**: Yeeah. So they are the SC-STs, here! In fact I know some of the neighbours I've had conversations about – how many more Rs are there in our community now as compared to earlier? That there are five R families here, earlier we had only two! Aisa bhi log baat karte hain. (People talk like this also). You, you could say well, people could talk like that about Muslims, or SC-STs (*munches*). In other places I'm sure

[4] Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes (SC/ST) are the constitutional categories by which Dalits (oppressed castes) and Adivasis (indigenous communities) are referred, respectively.
[5] Goddess of knowledge and art
[6] Goddess of wealth

> they do – that earlier there were only two Muslims, now there are ten! Or earlier there were two SC-STs now there are too many. In this community it doesn't matter, SC-ST – it matters if you are a R-!

My simple question on whether any SC-ST residents live in PPR prompted A to reflect upon the criteria of social acceptability in this gated community. His response – which drew attention to what the community regards as legitimate and worthy – did not differ in the kind of logic deployed by other residents in talking about caste as I had hoped, but was still more open and even mischievous compared to how other residents spoke about caste. Overall, it re-emphasised the centrality of castelessness in how PPR residents view their community and simultaneously highlighted its link to a default upper-caste Hindu identity. I will use three main features of this conversation – the Saraswati-Lakshmi dimension that A spoke about, his overall tone, and finally his own position as a Muslim – in conjunction with other material to show how PPR becomes a casteless bubble of privilege.

The distinction that A draws between the value placed on knowledge versus on wealth by referencing the goddesses Saraswati and Lakshmi respectively is indicative of a default upper-caste worldview permeating this site. As he points out, knowledge is indeed considered more respectable than wealth through mere hard work that is perceived to lack a certain 'cerebralness' (as my young engineer friend had also described his work); Subramanian (2019, p. 107), too, points out this difference between the "manual and the mental" as forming a core aspect of what she terms a "defensive" upper-caste politics. This discursive value ascribed to knowledge as an end in itself, as well as it being seen as the most legitimate means through which wealth is acquired, cannot be separated from the traditional and persistent upper-caste (specifically Brahmanical) hegemony over knowledge and education. Not only does the traditional occupation of the highest castes get associated with respectability and worth that

everyone should aspire to, but the inverse – namely acquiring wealth and status through non-academic, more ground-level 'grunt' work – becomes grounds for dismissal and ridicule in this gated community.

The R- family that A (and other residents, by his account) looks down upon are from a small village in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh, and the wealth they have accumulated as residents of Bangalore has been through various real estate deals and their construction business. They actively maintain close ties to their community; a very pleasant evening I spent at their house revealed that while they appreciate the security and beauty of PPR's good life, they do not experience any sense of community inside the gates. Their sense of community is instead tied to festivals they travel to celebrate 'back home' and a social life in Bangalore built around the company of others hailing from their village. It is also relevant to note here that they belong to a landed dominant caste in their home state. A's referring to them as the "SC-STs here" speaks to a distrust towards the lifestyle and professional choices made by this family rather than their position in the traditional caste hierarchy that is based on ritual purity; their house's interior is deemed as being 'too white' by A and his friends who prefer to hang colourful art on their walls, while the gritty and sometimes legally grey world of land dealings does not sit well with the "path of Saraswati" reflected in A's storytelling career and his affinity for 'academic chats'. The R- family therefore also lacks the attendant cultural capital and finesse of such choices – their English is not as polished as their neighbours', they dress too simply, and flaunt their wealth too boldly (they have four cars in a two-car garage). In other words, the R- family does not blend into the vision of a good life outlined in the previous chapter, embedded as they still are in their traditional identity and not actively shaping their lives to be more cosmopolitan.

Understanding social boundaries and who gets excluded in this manner is important for showing us which kinds of individual are deemed as worthy in this gated community. However, does the kind of ridicule towards the R- family – carried out strictly in confidence between residents who trust each other, as A's quote shows – really classify as casteism? Being from a landed dominant caste, the R family does not suffer from structural forms of casteism, and in fact even benefit from their caste location in establishing business contacts and being able to hire domestic staff from their home village. A's account of the general sense of dislike towards the R- family among other residents does point to some form of collective upper-caste logic at play as discussed above, but his mischievous approach and general tone of callousness in equating the dislike with casteism points to a general dismissiveness towards the structural dimension of caste; the advantages conferred by caste are simply not recognised by residents. The callousness of A's tone was intended to defuse my question about caste and prove that the PPR resident body values certain ideals rather than identity-based categories by pointing to a non-Dalit family as 'SC-ST'. In doing so, he also ended up demonstrating the exact way in which PPR is a casteless space, with residents coming from such privilege that was only magnified (through accumulation of social, cultural, and economic capital) over the course of their professional lives that they fail to recognise caste as a structure.

So far we have established that PPR is a 'casteless' space permeated with upper-caste logic in line with Deshpande's analysis. Another essential aspect of such a casteless space is also that it is inhabited by some kind of a 'default' identity – namely that of the upper-caste Hindu who can claim to be 'beyond' caste while still drawing on the advantages and cultural repertoire of their

traditional identities. This is observed by Carol Upadhya (2008) in the less elite middle-class residential complexes in Bangalore. She talks about how a new cultural style emerges among the upwardly-mobile software professionals, who find a new kind of kinship among neighbours who share the same upper-caste 'core values' articulated through shared Hindu rituals and notions of 'Indianness'. PPR differs from Upadhya's site due to its explicit espousal of more cosmopolitan values; the cosmopolitan changes to their lifestyles that Upadhya's respondents referred to as 'superficial' (as opposed to their traditional 'core values' remaining the same) are those things that PPR's residents for the most part seem to consider essential markers of the good life they have bought into.

Several residents I interacted with in PPR used to live in the kind of apartment complexes spoken about by Upadhya. PPR is, after all, an aspirational space that represents and cements upward mobility, as explored in Chapter 1. Even as a key dimension of this aspiration is an idealised cosmopolitan lifestyle, the 'core values' of Indianness that residents in Upadhya's case referred to seem to end up getting imported into PPR through people who choose to move in here. There is a shared repertoire of upper-caste – or 'Brahmanical' – culture that residents not only draw upon, but are able to build consensus around, not entirely unlike Srivastava's (2015) discussion of the default Hindu upper-caste identity that shapes community events in Gurgaon's gated communities. A's easy reference to Hindu goddesses is an example of this shared repertoire. Despite being a practising – albeit not particularly devout – Muslim, he has a commendable knowledge of Hindu practices and a deep enough knowledge of the pantheon to make analytical claims about the way the characteristics of certain gods are linked to certain 'values' in the community. Although this could also be a function of being married to a Hindu, it still points to a

certain pervasiveness of the 'default' Brahmanical culture at this site, which bleeds into a cosmopolitan 'casteless' identity as much as it is about being sufficiently 'Indian' especially for an internationally mobile group such as PPR's resident body.

This identity is a fundamentally elite one, as being casteless is the function of wielding enough privilege to be 'beyond' caste. A, too, regards himself as being a part of this same elite. While he is proud of his Muslim identity, A does not like that people in his personal and professional networks have started to 'see him as a Muslim' in the current political climate of right-wing Hindutva. What seems to bother A more than the otherization and vague threat of violence against Muslims in a Hindu fundamentalist society is that this awareness in others of his Muslimness fractures his own unity with the ideal of a generic elite Indian – one who follows the "path of Saraswati" in his career and carefully curated personal interests.

Being a kind of reward for having been meritorious in the neoliberal job market, PPR in some ways is the pinnacle of such a generic casteless eliteness. There is a sense of entitlement that pervades its resident body because of this belief in their own merit, and a confidence that they are inherently better than others – particularly those inhabiting the Outside. Nearly every one of my interactions with residents had some hint of this built into it. Some people preferred visiting places in the city where there were "no locals", a shorthand for working-class Kannada speakers[7], which points to the residents aligning themselves with an imagination of casteless

[7] Kannada is the language spoken in the state of Karnataka, where Bangalore is located. Highly-skilled 'professional' migrants, such as those who comprise PPR's resident body, often do not speak the language as they do not need to know it to survive in the city; the circuits they move through are different from these 'locals'. There is a further distinction here as well, however – high-income migrants from the southern states such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, or Andhra Pradesh are more likely to know Kannada owing to their own cultural proximity to it, whereas those from the north either take much longer to learn it or simply do not bother to

eliteness that extends beyond the boundaries of their gated community – but therefore beyond the scope of this thesis as well, since the construction of Bangalore's elite beyond the IT-migrant circuit is quite complex. Other PPR residents even had a problem with "the techies" – younger professional migrants employed in the numerous IT companies – because they added to traffic woes, put pressure on infrastructure, or were otherwise perceived as diluting the city's cultural ethos with the "insulated" lives they lead. The latter was particularly interesting, seeing as the residents themselves had once been among the young migrant crowd, but now perceived them negatively after having experienced professional advancement. Additionally, the 'insulated' lives led by techies were somehow less legitimate than the forms of insulation that PPR's residents enacted in pursuit of their fenced-in good lives. The notion of worth and merit, in this manner, becomes a lot more diffuse and plastic at the site of the gated community than Subramanian's (2019) discussion of the construct.

2.3 The Naturalisation of Inequality

Before concluding this chapter, I would like to draw attention to yet another way in which the construct of merit feeds into casteist logic – but this time through an interaction I had with a security guard rather than a resident. As someone occupying the liminal space – both physical and discursive – between the inside and outside, I asked the guard what he made of the difference between the two. He replied almost instantly – "aap bade log ho, bade log ka security humara duty hai (you are the big people, and the big people's security is our duty)". But what makes the residents 'big people', I asked, to which he replied that residents 'make themselves worthy' by working hard on their education and jobs. You all do such important jobs, he said, that it is our duty to protect you. Taken aback at this strange turn to our informal chat, I asked

whether the cleaners and the delivery workers he stopped at the gate did not work hard. Smiling slightly, he then held a hand up, palm facing me, as he traced a line over the tips of his fingers with the other hand. “Sab ungli same nahi hoti (not all fingers are the same),” he said, finally putting his hand down after he was satisfied that I had understood.

Without having made reference to the caste of the residents, the guard had put them on a pedestal and simultaneously assigned himself an intermediary place in the hierarchy in his position as the keeper of the Inside. This pervasiveness of hierarchy and hierarchical thinking was seen as an intrinsic part of Indian society by Dumont (1974) in his book ‘Homo Hierarchicus’, with Piliavsky (2021) taking forward this sentiment to add that it was hierarchy rather than caste (or the caste system more precisely) that was not only pervasive, but also provided a sense of identity and ‘hope’ to even those who did not occupy its topmost echelons. Dealing with the implications of this line of argument is far beyond the scope of this thesis, but I would like to point out that such an essentializing and monolithic view of Indian society (as Piliavsky also demonstrates in other books like ‘Patronage as Politics’ (2014)) ends up ignoring a long history of anti-caste thought and political movements that have aimed to challenge such notions of hierarchy (Teltumbde, 2018).

What I do want to highlight from this interaction is how the notion of merit interacts with caste in such a manner as to produce the idea that inequality is somehow natural and inescapable. Merit itself is accorded an almost pathological quality, and the more one does a certain kind of ‘meritorious’ – or ‘important’, as the guard put it – work, the more worthy one becomes.

This naturalising discourse also finds a place among the residents. V, a professional in the advertising industry who considers herself to be quite progressive, told me how her teenaged daughters sometimes visit their cook's home in the village of Garudacharpalya right outside the gate. They have come to notice the difference in lifestyle between the inside and outside, which they experienced most viscerally in terms of materiality – a missing footmat, the lack of a fridge.

> **V:** They (her daughters) are not *biased* as us…as they grow they'll understand that ok there is this divide and ok there is this inequality and you can try to take care of at least your helps to whatever extent you can, but other than that…of course, there would be inequality - it's God's way of creating the universe that it's not a level playing field for everybody. But at least it should have not been as stark; you visit some of the European countries and you see, it doesn't need to be that stark, right?

While Piliavsky above might argue that this is further evidence for her point on the pervasiveness of hierarchical thinking, I believe that this is a simple function of relative privilege. So far, this thesis has spoken about privilege in structural terms – and that is certainly one way to understand it, as something that confers advantage, often of a historical or generational nature especially when it comes to caste privilege. V, however, spoke of privilege as a "lottery" of birth. While this does not completely ignore the structural dimension of privilege, it still emphasises the accidental nature of it; a stroke of luck that befalls an individual. In this manner, residents like V are able to absolve themselves of any accountability when faced with the fact of their structural privilege, as seen in the quote above; inequality is still naturalised, and "whatever extent you can" assist the people around you is framed as a bonus. The privileged gated community resident still comes out looking like the saviour while continuing to build their good life on the labour of their "help".

Chapter 3: A Community of Individuals?

The previous chapter drew our attention to how PPR's residents are able to – and perhaps even must – ignore structural factors due to their caste and class privilege. This is the basis upon which residents reimagine themselves as atomised neoliberal subjects, which allows them to compete in global capital flows in their capacity of being individuals. Yet, a collective 'sense of community' continues to exist at this site, even serving as one of the markers of a good life, as seen in Chapter 1. This chapter looks at how community continues to be important to this collection of individuals, examining what brings them together and what drives them apart. It also considers the role of respectability politics in helping residents navigate the contradictions of living in a 'community' even as on a discursive level they negate the traditional forms of communitarian identity in their attempt to enact their neoliberal subjectivity.

3.1 Mutual support and 'like-mindedness'

A big part of what brings people together at this site is an ecosystem of mutual support as they go about building their respective good lives. Across my interactions with them, residents drew my attention to specific instances where they had experienced this ecosystem in times of need. Instead of delving into individual experiences, I will talk about one such instance that nearly every interview made reference to, which I had myself experienced as a resident here two years ago.

On a relatively routine weekend night, we were all shocked out of our peaceful post-dinner contentedness by a peal of thunder. The loud cracking was accompanied by the sounds of a sudden and heavy downpour, and I rushed downstairs to calm our dog's anxious whines. As I

soothed her down, a strange movement outside caught my eye through the window. Curious, I stepped out onto the front porch and was greeted by a steady stream of water coursing along the community's common road. I must have stood there for a few minutes, marvelling at the sheer force of the rain, when my attention was drawn back to the road, now completely obscured under at least a foot of fast-flowing water. By this time, doors had started opening all along and across the street as our neighbours joined me in watching the strange sight in front of us. The water had just begun to breach the curb and enter our front gardens when all the lights went out – that's when a few residents began to walk out into the rain, into the knee-deep deluge, heading towards the generator room to see if they could help get the power back.

While some water does collect in the low-lying parts of the community every other monsoon, this deluge was unprecedented. We learned the next day that the two lakes sandwiching this gated community had overflown, causing an immense volume of water to flow into its streets. The power of this flow was so strong that it had knocked down an entire section of the community's outer wall. The houses in this section had borne the worst brunt of the flood, with water filling their kitchens and living rooms located on the ground floor, causing damage to appliances and bringing in a variety of water snakes (and a turtle in one case) from the lakes, effectively rendering the spaces useless.

The community was quick to rally around those worst affected, drawing up a plan to supply food and water to their beleaguered neighbours. As I went collecting and dropping off supplies from door to door with a band of other women, I heard that a few of the engineers in the resident body had been roped in overnight by the Managing Committee to oversee the installation of new

pumps that would help get rid of excess water in any future cases of such flooding. Meanwhile, a few residents with contacts at the Municipal office were researching the best suppliers and prices of the pumps. There was an overall sentiment of solidarity in the face of an acute crisis, and the significant resources of every contributing household – be it in the form of their social network, technical expertise, or even the labour force they commanded at home in the form of cooks – were pooled in to resolve the problem swiftly.

Recalling this instance, SP, one of the first to move into PPR in 2006, spoke about how people helping each other out in this manner was the best thing about PPR. "Everybody pitched in, whatever little they could do". This sentiment of 'pitching in' was exactly how I had also experienced the community's response to the flooding, with people not hesitating to contribute their time or money for the benefit of the community. SP then went on to explain that PPR was much smaller than other elite residential developments, which contributed to a sense of ownership and knowing one's neighbour rather than the indifference that pervades larger groups.

This sense of knowing one's neighbour also extends to what people described as a 'like-mindedness' among the residents. For many, this like-mindedness was a serendipitous commonality they were not necessarily looking for when they bought into PPR, but it did become the basis of a sense of community for which they stayed on. While they all used the same term, residents meant a few different things by it; being at a similar age and place in their professional trajectories, having children who got along well, shared values and common interests were some of the things that 'like-mindedness' was used to refer to. The references to

shared values and interests in particular is reminiscent of the collective logic explored in the previous chapter – the importance accorded to the meritorious individual as they go about their respective professions, the shared repository of upper-caste cultural markers, and the attendant cultural capital of both these things.

This perception of similarity and the ability to get along well is what stood out across all accounts that mentioned like-mindedness. J, a 52-year-old IT professional originally from the state of Kerala, had the following to say about finding like-minded people in PPR:

> **J:** (being comfortable with another) depends on that person, these two people, their attitude and their *way*…See differences will always be there. If I look at (sic) here, there will be people who are like-minded, but there are people who are little bit different but I accept them also. See they have their own, everybody you know grow from a different culture, (and come from) different parts of India itself which is a country where you can see lot of diversity right from the language, their perspective, the way they live and the thinking process, the religion, caste – *everything* is different. So you can definitely see that kind of a difference when you talk to the people. So that way definitely, you know, differences will come. But the differences how you see (sic) is what is important actually. For me I see (the differences), that also I accept because they have come from a different thing. But then we always go to our comfort zone. That is why we (gravitate towards certain people). It's not that because it's good or bad or anything. For them, that is their way of life. For me, this is my way of life. That is the way I see it.

This excerpt highlights the importance of 'getting along' in a gated community, while also emphasising that like-mindedness seems to be about a similar attitude towards or even "way" of life. She then went on to explain that there is a group she engages with within PPR – the "Mallu group" – who come from the state of Kerala and tend to stick together ('Mallu' is short for 'Malayali', referring to people from Kerala). While she enjoyed singing songs and celebrating regional festivals with them initially, J felt a growing sense of distance from many members of that group who didn't share the same "ideology" which in this context refers to their attitude towards other residents, namely how they view non-Malayalis. Instead, J has found it easier to maintain a long-term friendship with neighbours from different religious and regional

backgrounds, referring to how well their children got along and how the families used to go on holidays together when younger. The messaging around like-mindedness is thus characterised by ideas such as mutual support and respect for the individual and their individuality in the face of difference. As J's account shows, the term like-mindedness is also deployed to bring attention back to what they see as the cosmopolitan nature of PPR's community because it denotes a degree of freedom in their choice to associate with certain people, rather than groups being formed on the basis of communitarian identity.

3.2 The Mallu group and respectability

Despite this desire to 'come together' across communitarian identities, some groups do get formed along these more traditional lines. The Mallu group is one such example that sticks out because it became particularly visible as it got entrenched in a conflict with the larger community. This section will talk about this conflict and how it came to challenge the sheen of respectability that PPR shrouds itself in.

The roots of this "groupism" issue (as SP had put it) lay in a long-standing conflict over the use of one of the many open lawns in the community. While some members of the Mallu group would use the wide open space as a walking and play area for their dogs, other residents alleged that they also let their pets relieve themselves in the grass. This was particularly offensive to the larger resident body because this was the only flat, open ground available for children to play football and cricket; there was even a soccer coach coming in at one point, and this was the place identified for the classes to take place. Rather than resolving the issue calmly, as most of my interviewees seem to have preferred, interventions from some of this Mallu group were reported

to have ‘turned ugly’; none of the people I spoke to including some members of this ‘group’ wanted to go into details, but from several snippets of informal conversation I gathered that some members of the group resorted to the use of derogatory, even violent language that ‘got personal’ (usually code for gendered insults targeting the female members of a man’s family). Much of this quarrelling unfolded on the main community Whatsapp group chat, due to which it was eventually dissolved and replaced by an all-women’s chat that has since restricted communication to specific topics regarding non-controversial community issues.

I was unable to ascertain if this issue had reached a formal conclusion. While the non-Mallu residents seem to have prevailed – putting up a large sign saying ‘children’s sports area’ at the entrance to the ground – some of the ‘Mallu group’ continues to use it as an exercise area for their dogs, albeit in the relative privacy of the early morning. The tensions continued to lurk for a long time, resulting in conflicts around COVID etiquette and coming to a head during elections for the residents’ Managing Committee in 2021, but they seemed to have died down by the time I went on field. In fact, one of the more formal parties I attended had guests from across this ‘divide’, and residents seemed to be cautiously reaching out to each other, moving beyond small talk and learning more about each other over a drink. When asked about conflicts now, residents only make oblique references to that time.

For the residents, the Mallu group conflict epitomised the individual-community tension, bringing focus onto it in a way that seems to have been quite unprecedented by all accounts. While the issue was rooted in a conflict over the use of space, what caused real offence was the transgression of a hitherto implicit community value – a live-and-let-live principle premised on a

celebration of the individual, which is the unit of atomised success and worth as explored previously. This principle is in fact framed in opposition to the impulse of seeking recourse to conflict or even basing one's sense of community in a communitarian identity. Such a communitarian identity that is looked down upon is necessarily aligned with a more traditional formulation of community as formed along lines of caste, region, or religion; such forms of community are not seen as legitimate in PPR, where the 'sense of community' is instead envisioned as subjects that are *a priori* individuals 'finding' other like-minded individuals with whom they can share space.

This emic understanding of the conflict makes a lot more sense when seen in conjunction with the collective logic that has been shown as operating at this site – namely that of castelessness. As explored in the previous chapter, this logic hinges upon being able to imagine oneself as 'beyond' caste (Deshpande, 2013). While this imagination is facilitated by the fundamental sameness of the resident body – which shares an upper-caste cultural repertoire – there is still an illusion of difference that persists among residents based on superficial markers such as the language spoken and religious affiliation; it is in transcending these differences, making friends with people who do not have the same 'background' or 'not caring' where a neighbour comes from, that residents feel justified in claiming a casteless status. This transcending is what forms the core of respectability at this site. The Mallu group conflict, however, ended up bringing these differences to the spotlight, with residents choosing to side with 'their people' rather than resolve the issue in line with the broader community's interest of keeping the peace. It was thus a direct affront to this shroud of respectability where residents try to rise above what they see as petty identitarianism.

The ‘casteless’ space of PPR that lies underneath the shroud of respectability has been the site where this community of individuals is able to come together. In their own words, they share a like-mindedness found somewhat serendipitously when they bought into PPR as part of their own pursuits of a good life. This like-mindedness – which also paves the way for an ecosystem of mutual support among community members – is founded upon the shared cultural repertoire of a ‘default’ upper-caste Hindu identity. However, this facet of their commonality goes usually unacknowledged, as the casteless neoliberal subject consistently denies their relationship with any identity that is seen as too communitarian, or as standing in the way of a respectably apolitical position that has ‘transcended’ the bounds of such an identity.

Conclusion: Hindutva and the apolitical community

Reading PPR as a site where visions of a good life are imagined and enacted means that the shadow side of the good life must also be closely examined; an 'anthropology of the good' is as much about the structures that this good is built upon as it is about the 'bringing back of culture' as Robbins (2013) sees it. Without looking at the good in its totality, we run the risk of being left with a defanged account of a radically neutral hopefulness that teaches us nothing about the context in which it is situated.

Understanding the pursuit of a good life in such a totality has been the mandate of my thesis. Part I, comprising Chapter 1, examined the emic accounts of a good life, proposing that its various and dynamic components be looked at as a bundle. The good life bundle thus emerged as comprising the dimensions of security, an aesthetic of manicured beauty and order, a fulfilling lifestyle that brought residents closer to an idealised globalised mode of living, and sense of community – these were the dimensions that were 'fenced in'. After examining the role of this bundle in the upward mobility represented by PPR, we moved onto Part II which unpacked the larger processes undergirding the bundle over two chapters. Chapter 2 examined how a castelessness neoliberal subjectivity is created in close connection with the construct of merit. Chapter 3 took forward some of the ideas from Chapter 2, examining how castelessness works with respectability politics at this site to continue the invisibilization of structural privilege and create a sense of community that seems cosmopolitan but still has an essential unity – that of the 'default' upper-caste Hindu identity. The presence of these, while all-pervasive in the gated community, were logically 'fenced away' by residents as they continued to imagine themselves as neutral, casteless, neoliberal subjects.

Having been a resident of this gated community myself, this investigation was deeply personal; I lived with my parents for the duration of my fieldwork, and spent time interacting with people and spaces I had grown up around. This has brought a fresh kind of approach to the study of gated communities, which until now seemed to lack an 'insider' perspective; while studies on gated communities have been done, none have been conducted by a researcher who could participate in the capacity of a resident. Yet, my fieldwork was sometimes fraught with considerations of family, neighbourhood relations, and a lack of access to spaces inhabited by maintenance staff and other workers on whose labour the gated community functions. However, my long-term association with the site meant that I could reflect better on some of my own lived experiences there in order to sharpen and contextualise ideas.

One such reflection was on the fundamentally apolitical nature of this gated community. In all my years having known the space and the people living there, the casteless bubble of privilege that was PPR had successfully stayed away from all concerns of local governance and national politics; "I don't get into politics" was a label of social acceptability, and none of my friends knew who their local government representative was. This helped me understand the dimension of castelessness in particular as it operates at this site.

As my investigation has shown, however, a 'community of individuals' is still at its core a community, and as such has a collective logic and shared cultural repertoire that binds its members together. This community is bound together by the logic of castelessness, and its attendant repertoire of upper-caste cultural markers. In the current political climate in India,

where upper-caste Hindu voters were the most loyal supporters of the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist government under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), it is perhaps not surprising that the presence of politics has finally breached the gates; what used to be fenced away is now being let in through loud religious ceremonies, political campaigns by the ruling party, and a kind of Hindu 'Sunday school' called Balbharati. While this dimension has gone unexplored in the body of my thesis, I see a strong connection between the groundwork established in this piece and future studies that may more closely link examinations of privileged life in gated communities to the rise of support for fascist politics, via the construction of the allegedly apolitical self.

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