

An Assam in Delhi : Pragjyotishpur Apartments



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Delhi : TUCKED in a corner of Dwarka's Sector 10 is Pragjyotishpur apartment; Sanjeev Borah is one of the 100-odd flat occupants. A software engineer with HCL and an Assamese by birth, Sanjeev was a happy man the day Newslite visited the colony: wife Reena had made khar (a dish of boiled vegetables) and massor tenga jhol (fish curry) for lunch.

Married for 10 years, Reena, a Punjabi, has settled in well, whipping up Assamese dishes at will. And that's the story of the housing complex: built in the early nineties to primarily house those coming to the Capital from Assam. But like Sanjeev and Reena, the complex is slowly making its own cosmopolitan moves, with a smattering of Punjabi, Bengali and South Indian families moving in over the past couple of years.

Registered in 1983, Pragjyotishpur Cooperative Housing Society was a means to "save our culture", as Society secretary Dr Nilomani Sarmah put it. "But gradually other communities also joined in."

The fact that the Assamese populace here is relatively less, and well spread out, propelled them to move in together, primarily to stay in touch with their roots, Sarmah's wife Rumi said.

In Delhi since late 1980s, the Sarmahs moved into Pragjyotishpur apartment in 2005. "Since my husband toured frequently, my first reaction to the place (Delhi) was, 'how would I stay here alone?' But gradually I got involved in activities concerning my community," Rumi Sarmah said.

For Reshma Shah, 45, life before this apartment meant being confined in her Geeta Colony house while her husband, a tea exporter, worked in Guwahati. "I was too scared to venture out," Shah said. "I stood in the doorway for days, watching the streets with my child."

"Respite" came when a friend told her about Pragjyotishpur apartment. She moved in five years ago.

Barnali Borah, 22, a Masters student of IGNOU, said living within her community has given a surge of confidence, a sense of security, and "I am more comfortable now".

But what made the society — "first of its kind in Delhi", as retired civil engineer A M Choudhury, on a visit to his daughter and son-in-law, claims — open its arms to 'outsiders'? Dr Sarmah said, "Most Assamese people could not really acquire the plots, which are offered here at cheaper rates. That's how others started coming in."

So by the time Asim Chakravarty moved in, in 1999, seemingly the first non-Assamese, he didn't really feel like a stranger. "I am not part of their culture, and I stick to my rice and fish, but I attend Bihu celebrations," he said.

With Chakravarty taking over as president two years ago, the arms have opened further — 2005 saw a steady trickle of 10 Punjabi and six South Indian families. Prabha Sreedhar, a resident for the past two years, admitted she does not know much about Assamese culture. But, "my husband and I thoroughly enjoy their music."

Her neighbour Kala Setia said, "When we celebrate Lohri, they join in. Assamese people never celebrated Diwali with pomp earlier but now they are going the Punjabi way." The spirit of India, housed in an apartment building on its Capital's fringes.

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