Extract from Chapter 'The unbelongers', 'Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets'

Delhi: Penguin Books; 2011. (pg. 8-21)

Shilpa Phadke,
Architect/ Researcher Professor at Industrial Design Centre, IIT Mumbai

Shilpa Ranade &
Sociologist/ Writer and Pedagogue

Sameera Khan
Freelance Journalist/ Writer/ Research Associate, Pukar

There is a Bombay, a Bambai and a Mumbai. Just like there are many different Bombay Girls there are many different cities in 'Mumbai'…

Each Mumbaikar lives in his/her Mumbai, occupying anything from a few square feet of pavement to several thousand square feet of super built-up deluxe real estate. Each, moreover, has very different claims to the resources and spaces of the city. This disparity is not something new or even unique to Mumbai. Cities and definitions of citizenship have always been based on the principle of exclusion – on grounds of class, religion, race, age, sexual preference and property ownership, among others. You could have lived in Socrates' Athens and not been a citizen if you were a woman. You could have lived in Julius Caesar's Rome and not been a citizen if you were a slave.…

…In Mumbai today, the unbelongers are the poor, cast in the role of ungracious migrants who occupy the city's spatial assets without officially recorded remuneration; the dalits and other lower castes whose presence is barely acknowledged, except grudgingly when they take to the streets during Ambedkar Jayanti; and the Muslims, who are increasingly stereotyped as disagreeable outsiders, criminals and potential terrorists. Then there are the couples we don't want sullying our park benches, the non-vegetarians we don't want residing in our building complexes, the bhaiyas we don't want selling our fish or driving our cabs, the gays and lesbians we don't want corrupting our young, the North-Easterners we'd rather dismiss as 'Nepali', the elderly folk we don't want

occupying expensive real estate, the differently-abled who we'd rather just ignore than allow any access to public space in the city, and, of course, in public space, all women without legitimate purpose, who should in any case be at home as good wives and mothers…

…The increased exclusion of marginal citizens is reflected in the increasing public violence against those seen to not belong. This violence takes the shape of ousting people from their homes and places of livelihood, of tolerating brutal acts committed by private agencies and the state against certain groups and communities, and generally ignoring the basic needs of entire sections of the city's population.

Interestingly, this endemic violence is treated as separate from the violence against women and often elicits much less public outrage even though they are in fact fundamentally connected. The perception that these two kinds of violence are completely separate from each other is so well entrenched, that popular rhetoric actually places women's access to public space in opposition to that of other marginal citizens. It is this perception that underlies fingers being pointed at North Indian immigrant men by some right-wing politicians after the much-publicized molestation of two young women near Juhu beach on New Years Eve 2008. Without awaiting any evidence, 'outsiders' were cast as the culprits responsible for 'disrespecting women' and 'giving Mumbai a bad name'.

The common belief that these two kinds of violence are separate and disconnected phenomena then allows

the city to cast all women as potential victims and poor, dalit, Muslim and increasingly, North Indian men as potential perpetrators of violence.[1] …In reality, both women and 'other' men are outsiders to public space, and the exclusion of women from public space is inextricably linked to the exclusion and vilification of other marginal citizens. However, the expressed concern for 'women's safety' allows ever more brutal exclusions from public space in the guise of the righteous desire to protect women. This kind of unchecked violence is a more recent development in a city that once prided itself on its diversity and tolerance.

―――――――――――――

Bombay/ Bambai/ Mumbai, all names for the city in English, Hindi and Marathi, respectively, became officially only Mumbai in 1995. This change has not just been nominal but reflects an increasingly conservative economy and polity, signalled by the communal riots that the city witnessed in 1992–93.[2] Parallel to this have been large-scale socio-economic upheavals including a shift from a manufacturing to a service economy, most tellingly symbolized in the conversion of its historic mills to glitzy malls. Prior to this, the working class had a greater claim to the city than they do now. In fact, the textile mill worker was one of the classic images of the quintessential Mumbaikar, a claim that has been undermined by the near closure of the textile mill industry in the city.[3]

…Mumbai then is no longer the city of dreams which welcomed everyone but is now actively hostile to the poor and the outsider. Mumbai's slum dwellers, numbering almost seven

million, form more than 50 per cent of the city's population. Yet, slum demolition drives are routinely undertaken using the rhetoric of beautification. Hawkers are moved around like pawns on a giant chessboard under the pretext of zoning and cleaning up the streets.[4] Bar dancers, and in fact dancing in bars, has been rendered not just illegal, but is surrounded by a problematic debate on morality and corruption of 'Indian' values.

This demonization is also reflected in the narratives on safety articulated by combative middle-class citizens' groups where the poor are seen as threats to the safety of the middle classes. Safety and order are prized in the new global city—both of which are presented as the antithesis of what is embodied, literally and metaphorically, by the poor: their slums are unsanitary, their homes makeshift, their bodies unhygienic, and their very existence a source of threat not just to the middle classes but to the city itself.

If the growing affinity towards neo-liberal economics has virtually legitimized violence towards the poorest of the poor, then the deepening of right-wing politics in the country, and indeed the city, has normalized the hatred towards Muslims.

The spectre of the communal riots of 1992–93, which sought to 'cleanse' the city of its Muslim citizens, continues to haunt Mumbai and shape its imagination. The Hindu right wing garnered support across all classes in Mumbai by playing up the stereotypical image of the Muslim Other as a crude, Pakistan-supporting terrorist, and a promiscuous father of umpteen children.[5] All Muslims were uniformly coloured, ignoring the reality that Muslims in Mumbai have always been a very diverse group.[6]

The last two decades have communalized relations between Muslims and other communities to such an extent that the Mumbai Muslim is now a pariah, increasingly marginalized from the mainstream, displaced and excluded from many of the city's heterogeneous spaces.

_____

So what does the exclusion of the unbelongers from city resources have to do with the exclusion of women?

'Safety' is the apparent reason why women are denied access to the public. The unarticulated reason why women are barred from public space is not just the fear that they will be violated, but also that they will form consenting relationships with 'undesirable' men... This notion of safety encompasses not just sexual assault but also undesirable sexual liaisons even if they are consensual. The focus on safety rather than sexual endogamy, allows the erasure of questions of both class safety and unwanted sexual-affiliations across class and communal lines.

Apparently there is almost as much shame in choosing the wrong kind of man as there is in being violated against one's will. Women are then carefully monitored in an effort to not just prevent them from being assaulted but also to guard against their forming unsuitable alliances with men of their choice. This surveillance takes many forms—parental protection, fraternal affection, husbandly possessiveness, neighbourly nosiness or even the more formal strictures of the community (sharia jamaats, khap-panchayats and jati-panchayats) and state (constitutional laws and police acts).

….This then is the covert reason why women are prevented from accessing public space: the anxieties regarding the seductive prowess of this undesirable 'other', which could adversely affect not only the reputation of the middle-class woman, but equally significantly, that of her extended family and community.

This control of women's movement is heightened in communities that perceive themselves as being marginalized. This is because women, traditionally seen as unsullied by the vagaries of the outside world, often become the symbolic markers of a community, the keepers of its tradition, and the bearers of its honour. Controlling them then becomes synonymous with the protection of the community.

_____

Safety for women is framed through the creation of a fallacious opposition between the middle-class respectable woman and the vagrant male (read: lower class, often unemployed, often lower caste or Muslim). By creating the image of certain men as the perpetrators of violence against women, women's access to public space is further controlled and circumscribed and acquires an unquestionable rationality. In an interesting sleight of hand, both the person perceived to be the potential molester and the potential victim of the act of molestation are denied legitimate access to public space on these grounds.

Women, however, often perceive some of those regarded as outsiders as representing the familiar 'eyes' on the street. For instance, one woman points out that the hawker who sold bhel across from her apartment building had been a familiar and therefore comforting sight for several years unlike the security guards who changed every month.

Similarly women commuters who navigated the area between the office district of Fort and Churchgate railway station lamented that ever since the hawkers vending books on the pavement were cleared in 2005, the area became uncomfortable after dark inducing them to walk through it at a faster pace.

The argument that middle-class women's, and indeed all women's, access to public space will improve substantially if we remove lower-class men from the scene is thus flawed even at the level of rationality. This argument is used to justify and reinforce various kinds of exclusions from public space, thus rendering both women and other marginal citizens outsiders to public space.

_____

Today, even though various gender-related issues are taken up in the media, the focus is on singular events and sensational stories. In this mélange, the fact that the various events are inter-linked is often lost. Issues like dress codes, the ban on bar dancers, the rape of a college girl, and the violence against women on local trains, all receive attention individually. In reality, these

concerns are related not only to each other but also to other processes of exclusion in the city: the demolition of slums, the attempts to clear spaces of hawkers, the prejudice against minorities and other 'outsiders', and in general the desire to erase everything that does not cohere with the vision of the city as a global sanitized space where things are kept safely in separate compartments.

Once one understands that these issues are inter-linked in complex ways, it becomes clear that they stem from the same desire to maintain the status quo. Without subscribing to conspiracy theories, it is clear that this status quo is maintained by pitting excluded groups against each other. The focus on safety for women clouds the larger issue of civic safety—that is, safety for all. It not only ignores concerns of a class- or community-based safety, but in a bizarre twist actually presents these as the problem.

Addressing the question of women's access to public space then means engaging with the messy intricacies of layered exclusion. It means confronting head-on the fact that the exclusion of the poor, dalits or Muslims are not acts of benevolence towards women but part of larger more complex processes where one group of the marginalized are set against another in a battle whose strings are pulled by forces outside them.

Placing these groups as the threat to women's access only means that all of them and all women will continue to remain outsiders to public space. Women's open access to public space then cannot be sought at the cost of the exclusion of anyone else. While there are particularities to women's exclusion, women's safety or access to public space cannot be imagined in the absence of a more general claim to city public spaces for all citizens.

Notes

[1] In February 2008, Raj Thackeray, estranged nephew of Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray and leader of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) launched a particularly virulent attack on the city's north Indian population. North Indian taxi drivers were physically attacked by MNS goons and their cabs damaged. A movie theatre showing a Bhojpuri film was vandalised. The attacks against particularly lower-class and working -class north Indians continued for several days in Mumbai and also spread to other towns in Maharashtra with many north Indian migrant farm and industrial workers fleeing in terror from the townships of Nashik and Navi Mumbai. In April 2008, Raj Thackeray played the Marathi card with greater vehemence asking industrialists in Maharashtra to reserve 80 per cent of jobs in their factories and offices for bhoomiputras or sons of the soil. Earlier in January 2008, Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray in a long interview to his party's newspaper, Saamna, had also raised the issue of a 'permit system' for all outsiders to live and work in Mumbai. Sporadic incidents of abuse—verbal as well as physical—on north Indian working-class men, are still not uncommon in the city. See 'Battleground: North Indians face attacks for second day, Mumbai shames nation', Hindustan Times, Mumbai, 5 February 2008; 'Sena wants Mumbai permit for "outsiders"', Hindustan Times, Mumbai, 22 January 2008; 'Amchi manoos, tumchi jobs: Raj Thackeray wants all corporates in state to employ 80% natives', Times of India, Mumbai, 10 April 2008).

[2] Some scholars have argued that Mumbai was a communally-volatile city even before the 1992–1993 riots; see for instance, Varshney (2002). For a detailed discussion on the impact of the 1992–93 riots on Mumbai, see Appadurai (2000), Chandavarkar (2004), Hansen (2001), Masselos (1994) and Robinson (2005), among others.

[3] Historian Raj Chandavarkar (2004) suggests that the closure of the textile mills and the rise of communalism are inextricably linked. He argues that the marginalization of the poor is reflected in the ways in which the workers' resistance was dealt with by the city's ruling elites and points out that at the same time, the Shiv Sena's explicitly communal agenda actively damaged the workers resistance and weakened communist trade unions. It is this communalization and marginalization of workers, he contends, that made the pogrom of 1992–93 against the Muslims possible.

[4] Sharit Bhowmik (2003) assesses that Mumbai has roughly 2.5 lakh street hawkers, about 30 per cent of them being former workers of the erstwhile textile mills. Jonathan Anjaria (2006) argues that since the late 1990s, elite NGOs and residents' associations have been actively promoting the idea that hawkers are to be blamed for many of the city's public problems.

[5] This stereotype is based on the Muslim personal law in India, which allows Muslim men to have four wives. Thus, the common misperception is that Muslim men father many more children than Hindu men do. As per the Census of 2001, Hindus account for 80.5 per cent of all Indians, or 828 million while India's Muslim community stands at 138 million, or 13.4 per cent of the total population. In recent years, Muslim fertility rates have fallen significantly. While the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) among Hindus fell from 3.3 in 1992–93 (National Family Health Survey [NFHS] I), to 2.8 in 1998–99 (NFHS II), the fall among Muslims was even more rapid: from a TFR of 4.4 in 1992–93 (NFHS I) to 3.6 in 1998–99 (NFHS II). ('Religion and Fertility Behaviour: Canards and Facts' by Rammanohar C. Reddy, Hindu, 10 November 2002). See www. infochangeindia.org/September 2004 and www. bbcnews.com, 8 September 2004; Indian Express, 7 September 2004; Asian Age, 7 September 2004)

[6] By some estimates, Mumbai has the most heterogeneous grouping of Muslims amongst all cities in South Asia. Currently about 18.56 per cent or 2.2 million of Greater Mumbai's nearly 12 million population is Muslim (Census of India, 2001). See, http://www.censusindia.net/ Besides, the general doctrinal classification of Shia and Sunni (which can be further divided by particular schools of theology), the city's Muslims can be categorized in several different ways by place of origin, language, occupation, class and caste. The major groups in the city are the Dawoodi Bohras, the Sulaimani Bohras, the Aga Khani Khojas, the Halai Memons, the Kutchie Memons, the Konkani Muslims, the North Indian Uttar Pradesh and Bihari Muslims, the Keralite Moplahs, the Deccanis and the Iranis.