

Ritual Pollution: Public Toilets and Questions of Citizenship

Shilpa Phadke

“Queues do not build up outside women’s toilets because there is a crush of bodies in front of the mirrors, but because the toilet cubicles themselves are occupied.... The lack of public toilets ...is more than an inconvenience for women. It is a denial of women’s different public policy needs; an abuse of their time and therefore a denial of opportunities to engage with, and transform, the patriarchal power relations which continue to structure and regulate society.”

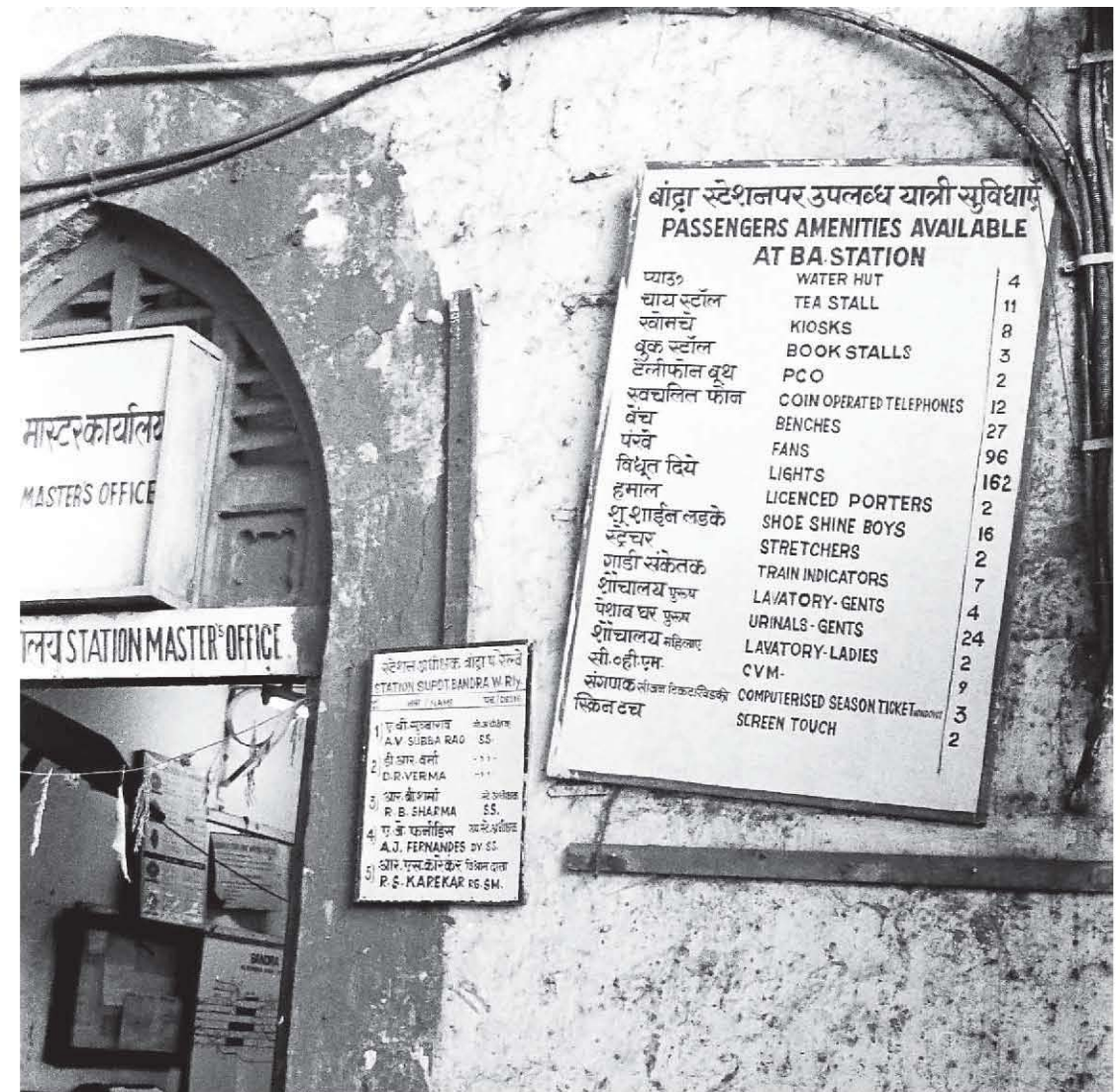
Julie Edwards and Linda McKie

“Go to the toilet before you leave home”. As little girls in urban Mumbai many of us have been taught to take the lack of public toilet facilities for granted, and ensure that we do not need to use the toilet. We also drink less water and as we grow older learn bladder control that sometimes leads to urinary tract infections.

As suggested by Edwards and McKie, the lack of public toilets for women in Mumbai can be seen as a violation of our rights as citizens. In this article I attempt to accomplish three things. Firstly to suggest separately that both toilets and women’s bodies, are in different ways seen as sources of contamination at various times. Secondly, I draw on the research done as part of the PUKAR Gender & Space project to examine the provision, or lack thereof, of toilets for women in Mumbai. Finally I attempt to tie these together, in order to, understand the implication they have for questions of women’s rights as citizens.

In the Indian context toilets are seen as spaces of pollution. In many homes it is unthinkable to have ensuite bathrooms. Toilets particularly are seen as unclean, as they are associated with the excretory functions of the body. Historically toilets were located physically separated from homes. Anthropologist Mary Douglas has pointed out that the orifices of bodies, its boundaries in a manner of speaking have been seen in many cultures as fraught with danger. These are the entry points for germs, diseases and other pollutants. In a similar way, feminist scholars have argued that women’s bodies are seen to be contaminating at particular times of the month or year, as they are associated with bodily secretions through menstruation or lactation.

Since both women and toilets are seen as contaminating in relation to public space, this creates an interesting scenario when it comes to the provision of toilets and I would like to argue as this has an adverse effect on the provision of toilets in general and for women in particular. Furthermore, public toilets in Mumbai are not particularly clean and often stink, adding to the problem. It is seldom that anyone would want a public toilet located near their place of work or their home. Since these are spaces that are polluting in any case there is no significant attempt to keep them clean.

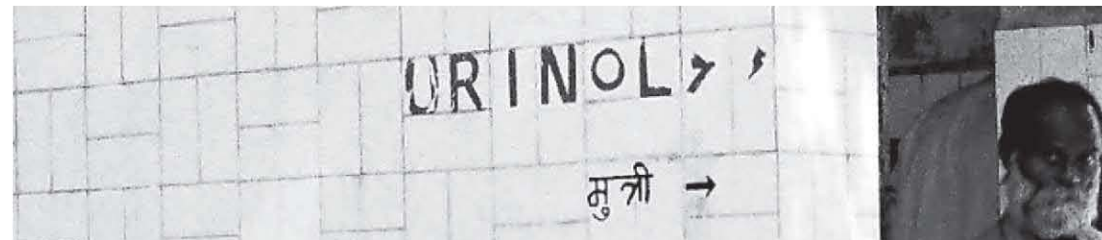


IX- Notice Board at Bandra Station - by Nivedita Magar

Any woman who has lived in Mumbai will testify that the number of public toilets is grossly inadequate. Those toilets that do exist are designed in such a way that one third of the space is occupied by the men's urinal, one-third by the men's toilet and one third by the women's toilet. The toilets for men and women shut at night but the urinal usually remains open 24 hours. Furthermore the urinals are free but the toilets are usually of the pay and use kind.

On many streets one comes across, little white-tiled box like structures, that are men's urinals without any sign of similar arrangements for women (Illustration: Tiled toilet for men-only on Shahid Bhagat Singh Road near Fort, Mumbai). There is also a completely unembarrassed air about this disparity. For instance, a notice at Bandra station reads: 'Men's toilets 2, Women's toilets 2, Men's urinals 24' (Illustration: Notice Board at Bandra Station).

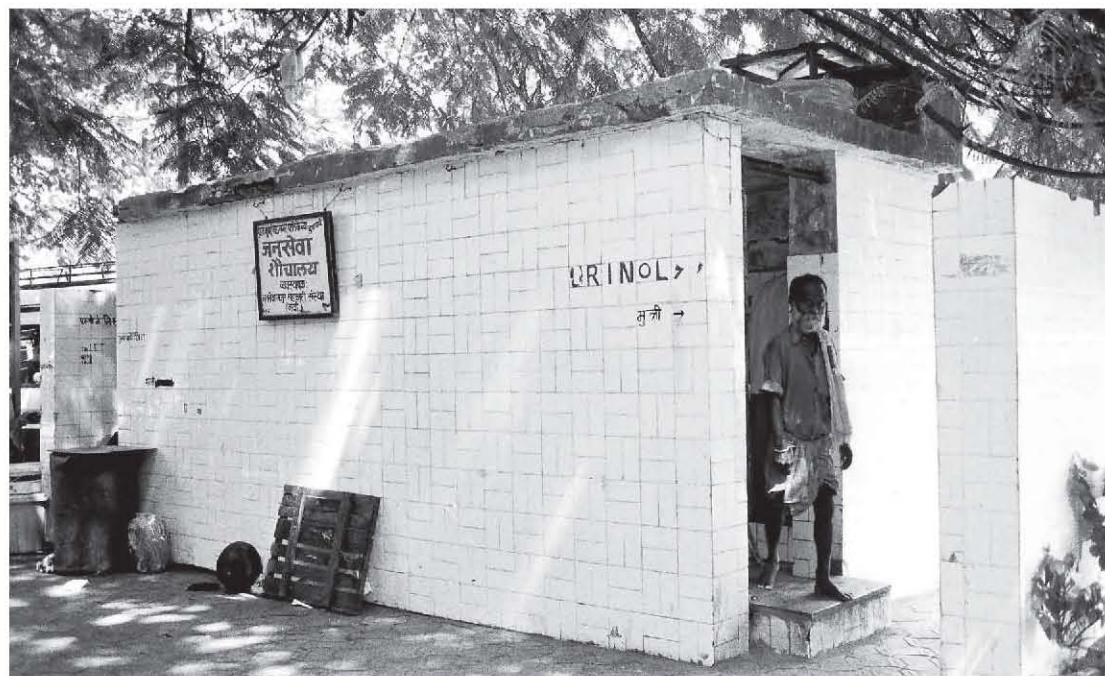
The PUKAR Gender and Space project also studied toilets at a few railway stations only to discover that though they do exist, women often do not know of them and they are often locked. If we were to take only one example for instance Andheri station which has four functional toilets: two on platform no.1, one on platform no.2 and one on platform no.5. The first toilet on platform 1 is for both women and men and is open from 6 am to midnight (approx) and is managed by women attendants for the women's section and male attendants for the men's section. The men's side has free urinals but the toilets are to be paid for. Platform 1 at another location also has a free urinal for men which is open 24 hours. The third toilet is on platform 2 and is for women and men. Our research assistant found that the men's side, a urinal, is open 24 hours but the ladies was locked. She was informed that the key is kept with the shoe polish walla on the



same platform and anybody who wants to use the toilet can get it from him. There was no notice however to this effect. The Fourth toilet is on platform no 5 and is open from 6 am to 10 pm., also with men and women's sections. At the time of research, the women's section locked with an almost illegible note scribbled on the door which read: "Ladies shauchalaya chaloo hein. Ek rupya dekar chaabi gents' shauchalaya se lijye". (The ladies toilet is functional. Pay a rupee and get the key from the Gents toilet). Though our research assistant hung around the men's toilet looking for the attendant she did not find him. In sum, for men, there were four possible toilets they could use in different locations, for women only one. Many women interviewed at Andheri station did not know where the toilets were located.

This disparity in provision of facilities, is often justified in terms of the disparity in the usage of public space by women, relative to men. Such justifications and discrimination in provision of infrastructure underlines the assumption that the proper place for women is in the home, and ensures that even if the numbers of women in public were to increase they would not meet with a friendly welcome. Not only are there fewer women in public space than men, but it is assumed that this will always be the case.

Why as the title of this article suggest do, I consider the provision of toilets to be an indication of one rights as a citizen? Edwards and McKie point out that research shows that women on average take twice as long as men to urinate. Research conducted in various parts of the world between 1957 and 1991 collated by Kira (1994) record the time taken measured in seconds from entering to exiting a toilet. There are eight studies on men's urination times showing averages of between 32 to 47 seconds and six studies on women showing averages of between 80 and 97 seconds. All these studies have been conducted largely in Western countries with the exception of the inclusion of Japan.



VIII- Tiled toilet for men-only - by Nivedita Magar

शौचालय पुरुष	LAVATORY-GENTS	4
पेशाब घर पुरुष	URINALS-GENTS	24
शौचालय महिलाए	LAVATORY-LADIES	2

Such data would suggest that women need more rather than less toilets than men. As recently as December 2003 New York's City Council introduced a legislation, to double the number of public toilets for women, making it mandatory that large buildings and public spaces have a two-to-one ratio of women's to men's toilets. The bill covers public arenas, concert halls, auditoriums and any new buildings or buildings that undergo renovation. This bill is a recognition of women's needs, and the fact that equality is not merely a formal equality of provision (that is equal numbers) but a substantive equality of opportunity and usage (equal access to toilets).

The idea of the 'citizen', not the 'neutral' citizen but the 'substantively equal' citizen, is one important way for us to negotiate the hierarchies in access to space and the boundaries, that determine who assumes the

right to interpret and claim that space. The assertion of an equal citizenship, must then challenge, the power hierarchies of the construction and use of space, at various levels: as cultural notions of the need to control female sexuality; as legal visions of women as a source of urban disorder; and as urban planning utopias of sanitised policed 'safe' public space, in order, that not just women but also other marginalised groups, might feel an uncontested and secure claim to public space.

The provision of more public toilets for women and other marginal groups, the disabled and children among them, would be an important statement of the recognition that they 'belong' and have 'rights' as citizens.

Government, at the Centre and in the states, needs to get more imaginative about promoting health education and effective sanitation



YAMINI AIYAR

NEW DELHI played host to the World Toilet Summit 2007 a fortnight ago. There is nothing as unglamorous as the

vision of dozens of people locked up in a conference room discussing toilets. Yet, the World Toilet Summit is far more vital to India's future prospects than the Fortune Global Forum that took place in the same week and hogged all the attention.

India's sanitation record is extremely poor. According to the United Nations Human Development Report, 2006, a mere 33 per cent of India's population has access to improved sanitation facilities. And this is the cause of over 500,000 infant deaths annually and cost India Rs 5 billion every year in medical treatment and loss of work.

Unfortunately sanitation has always been accorded

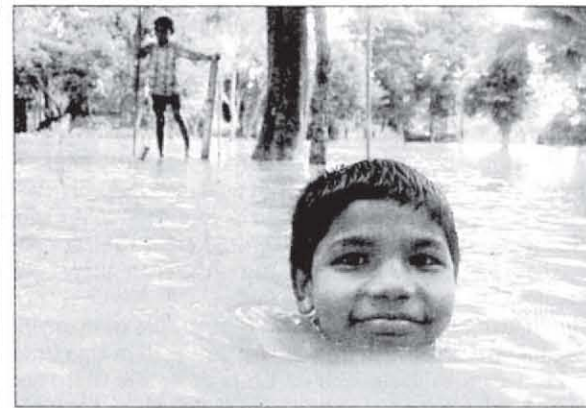
very low priority by government. But more importantly, even where money has been spent, it has addressed the wrong problem. Take the Central Rural Sanitation Programme (CRSP) for instance. Started in 1986, the CRSP aimed to construct toilets in every village through the provision of subsidies. There was little traction for the programme and coverage remained low — at 20 per cent in 2001. Worse, when toilets were built, they were rarely used. In Himachal Pradesh alone, of the 4 lakh toilets constructed, a mere 3 per cent were being used. In Maharashtra, 1.7 million toilets were constructed with less than 50 per cent usage. Most of the time, the toilets were used for reasons other than latrines — in Maharashtra there are cases reported where toilets were converted into puja rooms since they were the only concrete structures in the village! In states like Himachal Pradesh

No toilets please, we're Indian

and Maharashtra, there is inadequate understanding about the links between sanitation and health.

But sanitation is not simply about using toilets. It is about using them correctly. Take the case of Kerala and Goa. Both states boast of almost 100 per cent coverage and usage of toilets. Yet, bacterial contamination in water (a key indicator of poor sanitation) remains high. This is because latrines were constructed close to water sources and with very poor sewage systems.

So how does one promote health education, and with it behaviour change? Maharashtra identified an innovative solution in 2000 when the government launched the Sant Gadge Baba Swachhata Abhiyan, and later the Hadanghari Mukta Abhiyan



(2003) that gave gram panchayats the responsibility to motivate communities to follow safe, hygienic practices and stop open defecation. They were provided with administrative and technical support, and information campaigns, training, and exposure visits. Gram panchayats also competed against

one another for a cash prize of Rs 2.5 lakh awarded to the cleanest gram panchayat. The competition proved to be a whopping success. Consequently, the demand for toilet facilities in Maharashtra has risen dramatically. By 2003, an estimated Rs 200 crore worth of infrastructure had been built (and used) by

rural communities. Maharashtra now boasts of being the only state in India where over 5 million people live in clean, open defecation-free villages environments.

Drawing on Maharashtra's experience, the government of India reoriented its sanitation policy with the launch of the Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) in 1999 and later the Nirmal Gram Puraskar in 2003. The emphasis is on motivating individual households so that they realise the importance of sanitary practices. This is coupled with a subsidy package for households that fall below the poverty line.

Nirmal Gram Puraskar (NGP) is an incentive scheme that offers rewards of up to 50 lakh (based on population) to panchayats that successfully declare them-

selves open defecation free. Both the TSC and the NGP have been successful in accelerating access to sanitation. Between 2001-2005 alone 2.8 million toilets were constructed with usage ranging from 60-80 per cent all over India. But this is a small dent in the context of the magnitude of the problem — according to projections, it will take till 2024 to achieve 100 per cent sanitation.

However, weaknesses exist. One, the TSC continues to promote a subsidy regime, albeit lower than previous programmes, and states continue to focus on construction drives rather than health education. Two, the NGP programme lacks a rigorous evaluation procedure and thus runs the risk of deteriorating into a targeted numbers game rather than a reward for sustained behaviour change. Lastly, there is almost no effort at motivating and building capacity for officials implementing these

programmes. This of course translates into poor delivery. Experience from states like Maharashtra suggests that panchayats are best placed to initiate change. But in practice they lack funds and capacity. Funds and technical support to panchayats to initiate communication programmes coupled with state-level rewards to better performing panchayats can go a long way in speeding up the sanitation process.

In the final analysis, however, it is all about policy priorities. There is no sustained commitment on the part of the government of India or the state government to push for better sanitary services. This is why events like the World Toilet Summit are so critical to India's future. After all, if this won't make the government sit up and act, what will?

The writer is a freelance consultant working on issues of governance reform

1. Julie Edwards and Linda McKie, "Women's Public Toilets: A Serious Issue for the Body Politic," in *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, ed. Kathy Davis (London: SAGE, 1997), 135-149.

2. Research assistance for data on toilets especially at railway stations has been provided by Rasika Dugal, Akshata Patkar, Sonal Makhija and Aditi Dikey.

3. Mary Douglas, *Purity & Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge, 1966.

4. Cited in Edwards and McKie, 1997. Kira, A (1994) 'Culture and Behaviour of Public Toilet Users', paper delivered to International Symposium on Public Toilets, Hong Kong.

5. A Reuters report cited in Times of India, 06 December 2003.