



INSIDER OUTSIDER

The Vexed Questions of Access to Public Space



INSIDER OUTSIDER

In the last year, shop establishment after shop establishment have started sporting new signboards in the Devanagari script and in many cases, in Marathi, in order to avoid inciting the ire of the city's most visible 'nephew' and the destructive sticks and stones of his followers. Not that it takes much to make trouble or create a commotion in the city. One celebrity chooses to speak in Hindi, and the nephew has smoke coming out of his ears. One Police Commissioner claims Mumbai belongs to nobody's father and the nephew postures like a thwarted schoolboy. Anything might be seen as incendiary, particularly if the nephew is having a slow media week. Not to be outdone, the patriarch smoulders none too quietly when another Mumbai-based celebrity claims Delhi as his city.

However, my intention here is not to add to the several centimetres column spaces that the patriarch and his warring family generate every week. My argument really is to ask what all of this has to do with the recent anxieties around the North Indian migrant, especially the sub-species, the North Indian male. In addition to the alien language he speaks, there are the jobs he apparently steals, the resources he consumes, but most importantly there are the women he harasses. The notion of the North Indian male as ubiquitous harasser is neither new nor confined to the avowedly parochial.

Is Mumbai becoming like Delhi? Newspapers ask with predictable lack of imagination or eloquence every time a woman is attacked in this city. Are North Indian migrants making the city unsafe, shrill television channels ask in the aftermath of the nephew's parochial comments asking North Indians to leave the city. "Not our Maharashtra men", exclaims the 'son' when two women are molested

by a large crowd of men in the early hours of New Year's Day 2008.

While it might be true that Delhi, for instance, is certainly a much less friendly or accessible city for women, can one claim that it's the men in Delhi or even all of North India that make the city less safe? Is there something rotten in the states north of the Vindhyas? Are men in Mumbai intrinsically more women friendly? Might one seek answers in biological determinism and suggest that this the result of essential or regional personalities of men?

The next question then is: will driving the supposed outsiders away make it safer? Will a more homogenous Mumbai be a safer city? But Delhi is more homogenous, as are Chennai, Kolkata and Hyderabad and they are not safer cities. As for the North Indian brand of masculinity, is it the only one that's problematic? I'm not sure. Maybe we should ask the Chennai-based actress whose city thinks it sacrilegious to even mention pre-marital sex, what she thinks? Or perhaps, we should ask the women of Calicut, Trivandrum or Cochin who live in the state of high Human Development Index and positive sex-ratios where staring at women is a state pastime for men? Interestingly, when one does ask women, the vote is almost unanimous. Mumbai.

The all important question here is, is this attributable to the 'innate' gender-friendliness of Maharashtra men? I think not. It might be advisable to remember that the Chandrakant More who raped a college girl on Marine Drive in 2005, while wearing a law enforcer's uniform was a Maharashtra. Or that the late Pramod Navalkar, for many years guardian of the city's moral fibre, who felt that girls from Ghatkopar ought not to venture as far as Marine Drive was also a Maharashtra. Let us not forget that despite the son's protests many of the men involved in the molestation of the two women on 1st January 2008

were Maharashtrians. Nor should we be inclined to erase the fact that the Police Commissioner who responded to the incident by saying women ought not to be out at night was also a Maharashtrian.

“

What then makes Mumbai a relatively more accessible city for women?

”

My own vote goes to something much more mundane – infinitely less sensational, like infrastructure. Especially public transport: the buses and the local trains. What makes Mumbai different from Delhi or Chennai is not the men and certainly not any superior order of morality but the Bombay Electric and Suburban Transport Company and the Western and Central Railway suburban lines.

I'm far from the only one to think so. Studies across the world demonstrate that access to public transport is a significant factor in enhancing women's access to public space. Paeans have been sung to the transport system and films have been made immortalizing the local trains in Mumbai. The presence of a system of useable 'public transport' is what substantially distinguishes Mumbai from other cities, particularly for women. This is not meant to imply that no public transport exists in other cities but certainly in few other Indian cities, do middle-class women continue to use public transport like buses and trains when they can afford rickshaws, taxis or even private cars. In fact, Mumbai has always had the distinction of having over 80 per cent of its commuters use mass transportation.

The large work-force of women in the city commutes up to 40 kilometres on these trains and buses everyday. Approximately, 20 per cent of coach capacity at peak hours and about 15 per cent in non-peak hours, is reserved for

women in separate 'Ladies Compartments'. More recently, BEST buses have six seats reserved for women on each bus enshrining women's right to that bit of public space. For many women, it is these functioning even if highly overburdened (people regularly travel in numbers of 5000 in a suburban commuter train meant for 1710 commuters) facilities that make the city a happier one.

Mumbai's mass transport systems have given Mumbai's women, across all class backgrounds, an exceptional opportunity to access the public. They are an excellent example to show that effective infrastructural provisions can in fact make a dent in pervasive ideological structures and provide better access to women. Many women commuters acknowledge this contribution in glowing terms. Travelling with confidence on the local trains often marks a rite of passage for those who want to belong to the city. As one woman put it, "There is something essentially Bombay, about train travel", she said, "and now that I'm part of it, I feel like I belong".

Transport is one aspect of making the city safer and more accessible. Providing public toilets is another. Good lighting is a third. And this is only the beginning of the list. As for Mumbai for Maharashtrians making it a better city for women, blaming the outsiders has always been the easy way out. Hitler did it in 1930s and 40s Germany and so closer home (both geographically and temporally) does our right wing politicians Modi. If one blames one supposed 'outsider' for a city's lack of safety or accessibility, then one can shrug off the responsibility of providing the infrastructure that might actually make it a better, more habitable city.

THESE MUMBAI STREETS...

(Shilpa Phadke)
The New School for Social Research



This essay has been published in the 'Indian Architect and Builder, Vol.20, No.12, August 2007, p.116-118.

It has become rather the 'in' thing to discuss the city of Mumbai. The question is, how can one 'see' a city? And perhaps more importantly, how can one 'claim' a city?

Cultural theorist Michel de Certeau's essay, 'Walking in the City,' begins with the author standing at the top of a tall Manhattan building and enjoying the pleasures of seeing the city laid out below. The pleasures are voyeuristic ones, leading de Certeau to speculate that any effort to look down on life and view it neatly as a whole is equally voyeuristic. De Certeau dismisses the map – the attempt to make the city legible and readable by transforming its dynamism into a static image. He celebrates the process of walking, which re-inscribes the city again and again, each time differently making new meanings. With thousands of

individuals each creating their own path and offering their own interpretations, the city resembles a patchwork quilt of varied ideas and perspectives. In this messy, meandering city is the realm of lived experience, inhabited by walkers, who use and transform space, defying the spatial disciplinary regimes imposed by urban planning.

De Certeau tells us that walking is sometimes like dreaming. If that is the case, then what are the possibilities to dream in Bombay / Mumbai. In this brief essay I examine three notions about walking in Mumbai.

1. THESE STREETS ARE NOT FOR WALKING...

Even as one somewhat sentimentally embraces the possibilities of walking as dreaming, especially in this, the city where Bollywood fantasies are spun, most of us know realistically that it is little more than a pipe dream for walking in Mumbai reassembles much more closely a nightmare that refuses to end even after you wake up.

One of the reasons for this, is that when each day there are 200 new cars on the streets of Mumbai, and new rapid transportation systems are being enthusiastically planned, walking is actually quite suspect. The person walking on the street clearly has no defined activity, especially if the person walking is also 'looking' – being on the streets and looking, especially without apparent purpose, is a strict no no if one wants to preserve the façade of the law abiding citizen. At some times of the night – just walking is enough to have you hauled up by over-zealous enforcers of the law.

Another oft cited notion about the streets of Mumbai is that they need to be beautified – by things rather than persons, of course. And so it is that one finds various middle class citizens groups trying to clear hawkers and others they see as undesirable in an effort to 'clean up' their 200 square yards of the city. High art has always been admired and since the global (and profitable) recognition of Indian art it has become even more desirable in the process of beautification. And so outside Churchgate station we have a virtual menagerie lining the streets of Veer Nariman Road. But before the animals came on the scene – the walkers, some might say the 'real' animals had already been and regulated by the fence in the middle, which ensures that as a pedestrian you can cross either at one end near Churchgate station or at the other, close to where the road meets Marine Drive.

Walking is threatening, even dangerous to the imagined order of the city as it has the potential to disrupt neat boundaries that keep different people and objects safely in separate categories: inside–outside; public–private; recreational–commercial. The reign of neat compartments is of course not restricted to walking.

2. THESE STREETS ARE NOT FOR KISSING...

The divide between public and private space is perhaps the most zealously guarded boundary and two things, by no means disconnected to each other, (a) the presence of women and (b) public displays of affection, usually invoke heated debates that may apparently be about many things but are at core inevitably about border disputes and the establishment of lines of control.

Perhaps no group is so acutely aware of the private–public lakshman rekhas as women are. The anxiety expressed about the presence of women relates to the perception that women are fundamentally 'out of place' in the public

– that is, dislocated from private spaces. Transgressing this line of control involves a series of masquerades designed to demonstrate their private location through linkages to familial structures and masculine protection. Women always need both a reason to be out, and once out, a demonstration of purpose and respectability in order to legitimise their presence in public space.

At the same time, as Mumbai strives to take its place among the global cities of the world, the presence of women in their roles as professionals and consumers is increasingly seen as a marker of its modernity, and hence desirable. This desirable selective visibility is true not just of women but of expressions of sexuality as well.

The arrival of a global sexuality in complex alliance with narrow visions of 'Indian Culture' circumscribes the expression of desire, recognising the desires of only a certain class which must only be located in the sanitised private spaces of shopping malls, coffee shops, multiplexes, resorts and middle class 'model flats'. This narrow vision negates the couples in parks and promenades who have no other space in the city. It erases the slum dwellers who must make love under cover of darkness as they share space with others. The anxieties reflected in these efforts to regulate our expressions of desire, I aver, are once again anxieties about the possible mixing of the unmixable – people from different castes, classes, communities and ultimately the infringement of the public–private divide.

The question of the direction of the gaze is not a simple one. It is critically implicated in the – a question that brings me to my third point.

3. THESE STREETS ARE ABOUT DEMONSTRATION EFFECT

The choice of visual aesthetic for the city is not a simple

one: it involves crores of rupees in tenders and kickbacks, questions of impression management of potential investors, architectural fashions, and not the least keeping up with the city's Joneses, Singapore or more recently, Shanghai.

Mumbai's global aspirations, as represented by its contemporary architecture and design, are often mirrored in its choice of using an excess of glass and chrome; these 'skins' reflect back the image the city ostensibly wants to see of itself – as a glitzy world city. The use of glass suggests the act of revealing, it invites the gaze even as it acts as a barrier, obstructing and regulating entry and exit. Despite the fact that the material is transparent, it can mask, launch subterfuges, exclude and conceal with great aplomb. It appears to seductively beckon even as it repels. As tower after glass encased tower appears, discussions in dissenting circles of this new representative visual of the city, that in the not so distant past invoked chimneys and mill facades, is seen as a vision of an impending dystopia. There have been debates, protests and public interest litigation around the question of what will happen to the 600 acres of mill lands located in the heart of the city? More recently there have been loud and vocal discussions around the slum rehabilitation schemes especially in regard to Dharavi. Even as we speak, the battle to control what has come to be called rather delicately the 'Eastern Water Front' continues. This list only invokes the large tracts of contested space – but besides this, everyday there are countless little battles for a few square feet of space – not just to claim it, but to define it, design it and beautify it in the image and aesthetic of the one who manages to wrest control.

These city dilemmas have made it an attractive place for academics, urban planners, architects, photographers and writers of various ilk producing complex and engaged texts, photographs, audio-visual-footage, maps, and

drawings. These however, appear to have thus far done little to halt the roller coaster ride towards the vertical city. Nonetheless, the presence of these arguments, debates and dissenting voices that offer not simplistic solutions but ask complicated often unanswerable questions, reflect the presence of a city and people who have not given up hope of one day being able to walk the streets.

Some of the questions we need to reflect on, as confront our city's future are: What kind of visual aesthetic dominates our Bombay Dreams? What are the implications of the aesthetic of sanitized order for the dream of a more inclusive city? And finally, can we envisage actually being able to walk and look in this city, not as an act of subterfuge but as an act of claim, belonging and citizenship?

BMC to start 24x7 medical stores

YUVA CORRESPONDENT, MUMBAI

THE Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) will soon start 24x7 medical stores at 16 hospitals in the suburbs.

Officials from the BMC said that currently all the major hospitals — KEM Hospital, Parel, Lokmanya Tilak Hospital, Sion, BYL Nair Hospital at Mumbai Central have this facility while those in the suburbs do not have the same facility.

The municipal corporation has invited tenders for all the 24x7 medical stores

Patients visiting peripheral hospitals need not worry as the medical stores at BMC-run hospitals in the suburbs will be open 24x7. The decision was approved in the BMC's standing committee meeting on Wednesday. Tenders for the 24x7 medical shops have already been invited.

However, Sunil Prabhu, leader of the house, Shiv Sena pointed out few loopholes in the tenders. "The tender rules are made by targeting the private pharmacists and shop owners only. Other co-operative services which are working in the pharmacy field should also be considered in the tendering process and be given equal chance," he said.

