

Two day workshop on 'Muffasil in the Metropolis': A brief report

This two-day workshop on Muffasil in the Metropolis has been conducted as a part of our ongoing investigations into lives and experiences of young women and men who are migrating to the metropolitan cities for education and employment taking Hyderabad as an instance.

Anveshi's engagement with issues of gender and the city is relatively new and can be traced to the protests after the Delhi gang rape incident by young people that brought into focus issues of urban governance starkly - whether it is policing or street lights or bus-stops. They also brought to the foreground the issue of aspiration of young migrants to the city from smaller towns and villages. During 2013 when Anveshi had to coordinate the visit of the UGC task force on sexual harassment and gender equality on university campuses we met many groups of women students in Osmania, Central University, EFLU and MANUU to understand their issues. Women students from diverse socio economic background talked of a variety of issues - escaping marriage or poverty, malnutrition and ill health in the hostels, dependence on male students due to lack of facilities on the campuses, sexual harassment, failed relationships, harassment from the administration in issuing scholarships. Some of these findings went into the SAKSHAM report brought out by the team.

Not that these were the only contexts that Anveshi was brought into contact with the aspirations, rather dashed aspirations of young people from marginal background to the city. Since 2001, Anveshi had sought to understand the anger of Dalit student activism during rustications and the tragic and untimely deaths of Dalit students in the elite universities of Hyderabad. Their journeys to the university are marked by discrimination in everyday life that they hoped would end with a degree, obtained in a democratic and enlightened ambience of the University.

The crisis or the multiple crises that these muffasil students face in the universities today perhaps could be read as a symptom of the larger tension between processes of democratization and that of bureaucratization that mark the condition of the muffasil or rural migrants in the urban spaces today - seen in the form of 'illegal bastis' or 'demands for better facilities or food in the hostels', agitations around caste discrimination on the campus or protests by women students seeking relaxed hostel and library timings or people seeking space for a more open space for all genders. The metropolis promises an egalitarian, open and democratic space compared to a muffasil and rural that is still attached to the feudal, patriarchal and closed spaces. But the multiple crises in the urban spaces point to the more complicated and complex relationship between the muffasil and the metropolis; city and democracy and as well as aspiration and arrival. Even the full significance of the increasing migration of

educated young people to the to the cities is yet to be fully grasped perhaps - should we see it as part of the transition of the indian economy or a part of the transformation of the indian polity or both and much more?

Anveshi's current investigations on gender and the city are located in this context. The workshop is focused on how the city of Hyderabad is responding to the processes of democratization and aspirations set off therein initiated through migration of the mufasil into the metropolis. In the course of these two days, we would be exploring it through many debates: from changes in policies of urban development to representation in cinema, from university admission and hostel rules to networks of social welfare students, from the informal rules that govern everyday life including who to rent the house to and the ways in which the transition is being represented in literary writing. Since the participants and practitioners invested and engaged in the debates come from varied fields, we had speakers on urban development, architecture, social welfare hostels, queer activism, cinema, feminist documentaries and dalit literature. We also wanted some engaged discussions which is why we have pulled in people who engaged with these debates as chair persons and discussants. The sessions over these two days were organized around 'aspiring the city'; 'the changing face of Hyderabad city'; 'making the city habitable', 'city and belonging', 'caste and the city', 'queering the city' and 'mufasil heroes and heroines in the Telugu cinema'

The following report presents some of the discussion around 'desire and the city', 'gender and space', 'community and urban habitation' that took place over different sessions in which many speakers and participants drew attention to their personal trajectories to the city.

Desire and the city/Desiring the city:

City, to most people today, it became clear, is a desirable destination to escape immiserization in rural India, to better one's career options for a small town student and to live as one wants to a person running away from abuse and humiliation on account of caste, gender or sexual orientation. Many speakers, drawing on experience and research discussed how city functions as a space of anonymity, freedom and a better work opportunities and career options. Such conditions are also a product of farm crisis, uneven development but also desire for new identities and new lives.

Mithun Som's presentation focused on women who migrated to the city who spoke of lack of opportunities back in the village or town, opportunities to acquire new skills in the city, a space to achieve what one wanted and a compulsion to escape abuse and

harassment at home. Hyderabad being the centre of the economies of two states and a centre for education, it becomes a natural destination for many in smaller towns and villages for education and employment. But where they land in the city - university, retail stores, corporate sector or hospitals - also determines, to an extent, what they manage to do with-in the city. While the city gave them the necessary space to reflect on their journey and gain autonomy vis-a-vis the family, such space and autonomy were not absolute, but dependent on many factors, such as the perception of their own place in the city and family; the way they placed themselves vis-a-v-s the axis of modernity and tradition and their investments in maintaining their status in the society.

Rachana Mudraboyina and Dhiren Borsia's rich presentations spoke of the place of the city in the queer lives in Hyderabad and Delhi. Escaping from the oppressive social and familial structures is what attracts many queer people to the city. City is where they say one can be anonymous and craft one's identities. City offers a space to dress and adorn oneself; find people that one desires, form new communities. Cities are where one becomes visible to oneself and others. But are the space and the visibility not marked by class, caste and gender? They are. Transgender lives are marked by societal stigma that denies them legitimacy, violence of the Law and exclusion from public space restricting their mobility and life choices thus making their life extremely difficult. Entry into urban gay life requires mufasil and gay men from the marginalized communities to acquire 'taste in clothes, English language and upper class etiquette' in order to be able to 'belong' to that space. Queer bodies thereby begin to embody the city to become desirable and enter the space of queer desire.

What about the men and women who enter the city to escape the drudgery of rural life? AnantMaringanti's nuanced presentation brought into foreground the way the city embodies and is sought to be embodied by migrants and the mufasil communities slowly getting displaced in the rapid processes of urbanization in Hyderabad. How do they get to take care of their bodily needs in the urban space, if not their desire to 'settle down' somewhere in a context where the bodily needs of the urban poor get completely ignored, leave alone desires. Longitudinal studies of the migrant life tell us that it takes a decade for a male migrant to figure out whether he can stay or return; which would be a suitable place to set up a family. It appears that the lives of such migrants who depend on the daily wages are precarious at best. The urban space is not structured to cater to the bodily needs of the men and women, including toilets. But many do understand that once the city gets into their body - when one gets habituated to the city - it is impossible to return. And those old inhabitants such as fishermen who are getting pushed out of the city insist on marking the new space with their signature.

What exactly is the city that one desires? In fact, who desires the city? How is this desire constructed? Is there one city or several? Where does the mufasil stop and where does the city begin? Ashima Sood's presentation, through a mapping and tracing of multiple Hyderabad's imagined by different government agencies and real estate firms that speculatively use these imaginations opened up the complex notions of the city. Through her fascinating visual presentation, she described how an outlying area such as Shameerpet gets incorporated into Hyderabad - enclave living that promises all city amenities in the midst of a village, enclosure of the vacant land for future speculative use; promises of a real estate agencies that invoke a little known administrative city to sell their flats. The city is very much an object of desire, never a finished product but constantly in the making - pushing out the village or the mufasil but promising such comforts as greenery or cosiness in a new form.

Gender and Space

Space, public or private, is structured by power, determining who and how can legitimately occupy or use it. It became clear during the proceedings of the workshop that space also has to be at the centre of the thinking about democratic change in the city, since it is these ideas of who can occupy, live and utilize the city spaces that decide the shape and quality of living for new migrants or new identities in the city.

Sameera Jain's *MeraApnaSheher* and the discussion with her brought into sharp focus the place of women in the public space of a city like Delhi. Juxtaposing two sets of women - young women drivers from working class background who travel and navigate the city during the course of their work - and a performer who 'loiters' in the public places such as pan shops, local parks and bus stations, the film maker captures the instability created by their presence in the public space. It is as if the male centred public space begins to act up whenever a woman is spotted. The film mocks at the idea that such acting up occurs only when women are at the wrong place at the wrong time, because the mere presence of a woman's body is shown to set off such reactions.

Shikha Makhan's film *Bachelor Girls*, in contrast, documented the experience of single women from upper class seeking to rent houses in Bombay. Shifting to the city from other cities to live independently, these women got subjected to heavy scrutiny, surveillance and had to agree to humiliating conditions to rent the apartments. Rather than offering security to them as single women, the entire apparatus of residents welfare societies turned them into 'threats' to the moral fibre of the apartment dwellers and the city. If this is the experience of the 'most privileged women' in the 'most

liberated city' of India, how does one begin to think about women and the city space in India, is a question that the film seems to ask.

Domala Mallesh's talk about the private women's hostels that he manages in Hyderabad also brought into focus the gendered norms that frame the rules and the changing needs of the bachelor girls who throng to the city for writing competitive exams. Unlike earlier, there is an increasing demand for such accommodation in the city which is clean, safe and offers some space to the inhabitants, but the rules on entry and exit remain in place.

Khushnawaz Rashid's presentation brought into focus this tension between the large scale entry of women into the university spaces and the gendered norms that govern the hostel rules. Her questioning of the biased hostel rules led to expulsion from the hostel by the administrators of MANUU.

Chayanika Shah's layered presentation discussed her journey in Bombay as a lesbian, feminist and queer activist and the concomitant struggle for space in the women's movement and the queer movement. She pointed out that while feminist spaces began to acknowledge lesbian women after hesitating for long, lesbians do not yet have any space in the queer community which is dominated by gay men. Lesbian life is also marked by invisibility in the public domain, doubly disadvantaged through the constraints that accompany one's gender (as a cis-gender woman) and sexual orientation. She argued that unless heteronormativity of the public space is critiqued by women's movement and women as such get legitimacy to be in the public space, it will be difficult for the women who love women to get public visibility and legitimacy.

The impact of invisibility of women in the public place to personal life was poignantly brought out by Jayati Mathur. The heteronormativity of the public space and the general absence of (unattended) women in the public places makes it very very difficult for people like her to find a partner. Unless a lot more women are out there in the public places, how does one even know who is interested in loving women?

Mohanakrishna Indraganti's talk brought into focus another layer of the public invisibility of women through a discussion of women in Telugu cinema. He noted, in his conversation with Satish Poduval, that the role of women protagonists is sought to be severely limited in the contemporary Telugu cinema in order to foreground the role of the male protagonists. There is a concerted effort on the part of the directors, producers and 'heroes' to craft the role of the heroine in as superficial manner as possible according to some set of standard ideas, which are quite difficult to shift. As

such, we find very few female protagonists who are working or achieving or doing significant things in the Telugu films.

Community and Urban Habitation

Migrants and new entrants need to get habituated to the city and also make the city their home. A lot of learning is needed to know how to get around, where to stay, who to talk to or where to eat and even learn how to talk and what to eat. How do people from the communities that have been excluded and marginalized from public places and civic life find a footing or make a home in the city? It is here that the hostels and living spaces assume critical importance.

Muralikrishna's eloquent presentation spoke of the journey of the Dalit students from village to the city that he characterized as 'transit' rather than migration or transition. This journey remains open ended as many students from the SC communities revert to the village or drop out of the education system. It is here that the University space and the hostels play a pivotal role in enabling the transition of these students from skilled laborers to meritorious students. But are they prepared to do so, by recognizing that the Dalit students' require a different kind of space than the privileged students? To be protected from random police questioning or to provide a place to stay for friends and relatives from the village who do not have a place in the city and more importantly to appreciate the difficult transition that they undergo.

Durga Prasad and Ramakrishna's made presentations on an initiative named State Welfare Resident Student Association in Telangana state that seems to have arisen precisely from this experience and awareness. This initiative, formed by the ex-students of these SC, ST, OBC and Minority hostels aims to aid and equip the current students to navigate city's educational institutions and state bureaucracy apart from building linkages between the students and communities. In a sense, this is an exercise of building social capital - networking, building new communities and solidarities. It is also an attempt to protect the public institutions that have enabled the marginalized communities in the transition to urban life.

Pasnuri Ravinder's conversation with Gogu Shyamala around his short story collection 'Out of Coverage Area' brought into focus the problem of caste that haunts the urban civic life of Dalits. In the offices and apartment complexes there is a consistent attempt to find out the caste of the Dalit employees and occupants that often also results in their isolation from social life. The threat of 'getting outed' is always already present for Dalit middle class families who make the city their home.

Exclusion or marginalization of communities also occurs at another level. Sajjad Shahid's presentation on the changing architecture of the city of Hyderabad brought into focus the ways in which Islamic and Muslim motifs were sought to be erased from the state/public monuments after 1948. His and writer Anand Raj Varma's presentations gave rise to a lively debate on the 'politics of nostalgia' about the cities as well as 'political nostalgia' about Hyderabad. What does it mean to erase the symbols of a community from its public face and space?

R.Srivatsan, Sheela Prasad, Pushpesh Kumar, K.Sajaya, Madhumeeta Sinha, Satish Poduval, B.S.Sherin and Gogu Shyamala enriched the discussions by bringing in their insights and knowledge of the field. Some gave the participants critical background information as well as framed the discussion in the session, and the others used the space enabled by the method of conversation to raise important and pertinent issues.

The discussions in the workshop suggested that it is intersecting lines of inquiry that would be more fruitful in exploring the question of city and space. For instance how do institutional spaces shape the experience of women, dalits and queer and other rural migrants to the city? What kind of social and cultural capital is required to become a city person in neo-liberal India? Do the hostels play any role in the transition of migrants into city-dwellers and if so, which hostels and in what ways? How does the city become habitus for the body and vice versa? How do caste and gender hierarchies shape this habitus? What are the ways in which different group of women seek to navigate, occupy or own up the urban spaces? And what are the 'tacit knowledges' the acquisition of which would make a successful city dweller? In short, the workshop brought to the foreground the impossible desire and the urgent need to imagine city as democratic space in contemporary India.

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