

Metropolis as Patriarch?
The Feminine experience of the City

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Editorial

Woman in the City

*City of stars
Are you shining just for me?
City of stars
There's so much that I can't see
Who knows?
Is this the start of something wonderful and new?
Or one more dream that I cannot make true?*

The male and female protagonists in the movie *La La Land* thus express their hope, sorrow, excitement and apprehension about their new life in the city. Such is the promise of city life, bringing forth the excitement of something wonderful and new but also the possibility of disappointment, failure and breaking down of many dreams.

It is this Janus face of the city that is often reflected in popular culture. On one hand, we see that cities are often romanticised: Paris is the 'City of Love', Kolkata is a 'City of Joy' and Mumbai as the 'City of Dreams'. We also see city imagined as a space of anonymity, inauthenticity, mistrust, violence and corruption full of amoral people among many regional literary traditions, often coupled with nostalgia for the rural spaces left behind. City is even likened to a wily woman ready to ensnare the men away from the family.

But do the city-spaces conform to only either of these descriptions? Unconditional love, joy or dreams or misery, mistrust and violence? We don't think so. An African or Arab immigrant in Paris or an immigrant from rural Bihar or UP in Mumbai would tell a far more complex story. An immigrant of 1960s would tell a different story from one in the new millennium. Far too often such stories would be of men. It is only in very recent times that we have begun to hear stories of women migrating and living in the cities. And, if we imagine such an immigrant or a migrant woman to be a transgender person, an underprivileged background, what would we hear? This broadsheet is an attempt to move beyond such utopic or dystopic visions of the city and city life to explore what city could mean for women in contemporary India.

India is undergoing a rapid urbanization, the number of women coming to the cities for education and employment is growing every year (see box item Why women migrate⁴). Cities, however, are not mere physical spaces, nor are they inherently egalitarian. One's gender, caste, class, religion, location determines how one encounters and inhabits the city-space. Equally, our imagination of it, as the repository of aspirations and anxieties, also forms/structures our relationship to the city. In this broadsheet we propose to see the city as a structured gendered space which is hierarchical but at the same time highly contested. We share a sense of 'notional urbanity' which is in a constant flux.

We have put together this issue of the Broadsheet in the course of working on a project titled "City and Sexuality: A Study of Youth Living and Working in Hyderabad", at the Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies. We found that most of the literature on youth migrating to cities, focused on educational spaces or the spaces of work with city remaining as a mere backdrop. In our interviews with fifty women, mostly single, we found that city occupied a central place in their narratives in and around work, educational and hostel spaces. While trying to understand their aspirations, desires and struggles as individuals we also saw that these single women were negotiating their space in a big city.

Our study was an attempt to understand how moving away from family and setting up their lives in the city affected women. We focused on how this journey shifts their sense of self, relation with family and their notions of intimate partnership. Their accounts of changes (or otherwise) in clothing, lifestyle, notions of morality helped us to understand how they

complied with, negotiated and resisted the patriarchal code of conduct.

The city in fact allowed them to broaden their horizon, gave them more opportunities and access to knowledge networks. At the same time, it kept them under constant surveillance that curtailed this access. Finding more financial autonomy often helped women to better negotiate their choices in marriage and career.

However, for many women, especially those from more marginalized sections, jobs are often extremely demanding and the support network available in bourgeoisie families is not available to them. Life becomes precarious in these conditions, while some women are able to follow their aspirations and are able to hold onto the city dreams even in relationships, many are forced to go back to traditional marriage setups.

City dreams, Surveillance and struggles

City exists in the form of dreams and desires for many women for whom coming to the city itself is the most crucial step to take. *City of Hope* by Mithun Som attempts to analyse the individual paths of women migrants to Hyderabad. These paths reflect the ways in which this city has developed in this region - an educational and IT hub over the 1980s and 1990s; the neoliberal city providing employment and civic facilities amidst paucity throughout the state. Who can inhabit the city in what ways depends on the background they come from and the nature of entry that one gets to the city.

A Room of one's own by Rani Rohini Raman describes and analyses the constant surveillance that single women are subjected to in accessing residential spaces in city. Not just landlords or hostel wardens (government and private) but fellow inmates and the entire neighbourhood try to be their custodians to see that these single women do not pose any threat to the 'normalcy' of 'their' city.

Bloodshed in Bathroom by Subhadra Joopaka brings the issue of caste and gender together. Her story of the inmate of a social welfare hostel, brings out the determined struggle of a young Dalit woman for self-respect who stands her ground to refuse a medical test to prove her innocence. It brings to the foreground the moral policing and surveillance of conduct that young women from marginalized background face in public funded hostels that are meant to serve them.

It is this public-private surveillance of young women away from home, either in public or private hostels that the new urban movements such as Pinjra Tod seek to challenge in order to claim equal access to hostels and public spaces. They have argued that such surveillance amounts to public control of their conduct which is discriminatory and violates the fundamental right to equality that the Constitution guarantees. The interview with the *Pinjra Tod* members, *Breaking the chains*, elaborates their critique of the unjust hostel rules in universities of Delhi and their broader perspective in raising their voice against them.

Looking for Leisure, pleasure in the city

The story of unbelonging: women in public space by Madhurima Majumder discusses the book *Why Loiter*, that brought attention to the issue of women's access to urban public spaces for the first time. It goes on to discuss several other small but significant movements that were organised to claim public spaces by urban women in India.

Conducting/curtailing pleasure: Notes on leisure, conduct and urban sexuality by Pranoo Deshrajju brings to our attention the contradictory ways in which spaces of leisure such as pubs function for young urban women. In enabling some of them to be 'uninhibited and free' in these cordoned off spaces, Pranoo argues that the largely male and misogynist nature of the public space in general remains untouched and endorsed. We understand that women can be consumers but not equal citizens.

In *Owning the City: Belonging and anonymity*, Madhumeeta Sinha discusses an important documentary film *Mera Apna Sheher* by Sameera Jain that demonstrates the normative maleness of the city space that women encounter when they try to 'belong' to the city in everyday life. As municipal workers or drivers or as pedestrians they have to inhabit the city which is designed and meant for men.

Public transport is the primary way in which most people get to know the city and navigate it. It is like the main artery, determining the degree of access to the city of people, especially newcomers. Commuting to college, to work, to shop or for leisure depends on the availability and accessibility of public transport, to a large extent. Mithun Som tries to bring alive this dimension through an experiential account of public transport in her *My tryst with local transport in villages, towns and cities*.

Claiming the City Space: Unheard voices

The margins speak but can we really listen? While putting this broadsheet together, we were acutely aware of the fact that though we have tried to raise certain issues by charting the lives of women, they are not the only vulnerable dwellers of the city. Those who don't conform to the norm, like non-binary or transgender people face far more violence and systematic exclusion in our smart cities.

The collection of social media posts made by Rachana Mudraboyina, a prominent transgender activist of Hyderabad indicates the enormity of the struggle involved in trans-people claiming the city space. Rachana's activism is expansive and actively engages with issues of other marginal communities like Dalits, farmers, sex workers and labour groups. Her activism comes from a deeper understanding that intersections of marginalized identities like caste, religion, region have significant bearing on trans people's lives.

Indeed, we hear very little of how Dalit women encounter or experience the city. Madhavi Mirapa's article focuses on the experiences of Dalit women who migrated to the city. The younger Dalit women come to find financial autonomy and as a way out of the restricted lives back in their homes. However, their meagre salaries and long shifts keep them from engaging with the city, form a community outside their familial networks or engage with any political discourse.

Unexpected bonding in the city

City engenders different forms of bonding which do not fall under the conventional labels. Devyani and Anusha's piece *Urmila Conducts* presents one such bonding between Urmila, the bus conductor and the male driver she works with as well as her other female conductor colleagues in the predominantly male public transport sector. It beautifully captures a day in her work life as a bus conductor as the authors travel with her throughout the day. Khadeer Babu's *Subway* narrates the bond between two colleagues working in the software sector. The characters, a male and a female, brought together in the workspace, develop a relationship that is intimate but not romantic or sexual. In both these instances, one real and one fictional, the urban workplace provides a space to interact and form unique kind of

relations among women and men that cannot be named.

Neha Dixit's, *Why did you let him shoot that?: An Indian women's story of "revenge porn"* on the other hand talks about the darker side of relationships. A man takes revenge on his ex-girlfriend by posting their intimate pictures for public consumption when a relationship does not work out. Both the relationship and the revenge is borne of toxic masculinity enabled by the new spaces in urban India. But the new opportunities for the former also require new cultural imagination and institutional support so as to not result in the latter. How does one do it is something that this essay asks.

Hyderabad: Breaking the myth of the old and new

Hyderabad, like most other long-standing cities, is geographically divided into old, new and cyber cities. Often, this geographical division is mapped onto conceptual categories of backward, modern and ultra-modern. Two essays question such conflation of categories by discussing the complex interplay of modernity, geography and politics.

Javeed Alam's essay, *The burqa and the rickshaw*, situates the new visibility of the burqa, often seen as a symbol of backwardness, in the socio-economic changes in the city of Hyderabad. Increased educational opportunities for Muslim girls is accompanied by increased visibility of burqa in several new places, suggesting that it is seen as a sign of modernity. It seems to have facilitated Muslim women's increased access to public spaces. At the same time with changing development paradigm of the city that promoted auto-rickshaws, cycle rickshaws which earlier constituted the main image of Hyderabad, have gone missing.

Thoughts about Gender and Space in the city of Hyderabad by Tejaswini Madabhushi reflects on her experiences of organising different gender based campaigns to occupy public spaces in the city of Hyderabad. The city, she learnt, was not an abstract empty space but inhabited and lived space for different communities. Campaigns for occupying public spaces need to be attentive to these histories and lived realities.

In love with the City

City itself also is the object of affection for many writers. We have included short poems and stories where city becomes the main protagonist. Ravish Kumar's poems describes

the love of a young migrant man living and romancing Delhi. Nabina Das's poems *Ode to Leaving* and *Dilli Nazm*, are about the love for the city, where city becomes an integral part of individual lives, its culture seeping through their bodies. Her short story, *The Meeting*, weaves an engaging story about two individuals in the background of hustling, running, singing and dancing city.

Conclusion

City provides single migrant women of a certain class with the cherished anonymity allowing them to be free of the constant surveillance of family and relatives in their villages or hometowns. Transgender people too find a little space in cities. Men and women form new bonds and relationships as the work and educational spaces provide them opportunity to meet and

interact. However, a code of morality, an unwritten rule of what is expected/ allowed of women and what is not, also defines the conduct of women. Anything beyond it becomes unacceptable - including dress, timing, company, and gestures among other things. Such codes are endorsed and reinforced through the media debates. As such in the case of single migrant women, the larger society takes up the role of guardianship, often trying to control women's lives in the garb of providing safety. The different spaces in the city like the hostels, pubs, residential spaces and other public spaces become the platform for execution of such guardianship.

Seen from the gendered lens, the very physical geographical division of the city into a 'stagnant old city' and a 'vibrant new city' comes across as dubious. Women from the 'stagnant' Old city are travelling and aspiring for education and

jobs, while the women in 'vibrant' and 'shining' Hitech City are being interrogated about their conduct and freedom by the office employees and hostel wardens.

In fact, when we bring in the often-unexplored area of the intersection of migration to the city with gender, caste, class and religion, what emerges is the way in which the people from different locations interact with the multiple sites in the city to create their own narratives. Both city and experiences of the city dwellers, in this case, Hyderabad, turn out to be extremely heterogeneous, enabling us to complicate the pre-existing portrayals of Hyderabad.

**Rani Rohini Raman, Mithun Som,
Madhurima Majumder, A. Suneetha**

(The editorial team would like to express gratitude to all the writers and translators)

Why women migrate: Based on census data of 2001 and 2011

■ Mithun Som

In India, of the total population that migrates, women form a higher percentage than men. According to the 2011 census, 69 percent of all migrants are women. In Andhra Pradesh¹ however, 65 percent of all migrants are women.

The major reason for migration of women is marriage and this hasn't changed much from 2001 census. Across India, this figure is 70 percent. In Andhra Pradesh, the figure is lower: 61 percent of the women show marriage as the reason for migration. The percentage of women migrating to urban areas because of marriage is less than to rural areas (78 to rural and 47 to urban in India; 71 and 37 percent respectively in Andhra according to the 2011 census).

Moving with the household is another major reason for migration.

About 10 percent of all Indians migrating reported work as the reason in 2011. In Andhra Pradesh, the percentage is higher at 12 percent. However, among women, work related migration is a very small 2.4 percent of the total reasons for migration. This is higher for Andhra Pradesh at 3.5 percent in 2011. There has been a noteworthy increase in this figure of women migrating for work and employment after the 2001 census. Between 2001 and 2011, the all India figure of women migrating for employment rose from 1.7 to 2.4 and specifically to the urban areas, this figure rose from 2.9 to 3.7 from 2001 to 2011. Overall in Andhra Pradesh during the same period, the percentage rise was from 2.2 to 3.5 and to the urban areas of Andhra Pradesh it was from 4.2 to 5.5 percent.

Business as a reason for migration is seen in only one percent of the migrating population in India and 1.4 in Andhra Pradesh. For women, this is even more miniscule with 0.4 percent in India overall and 0.5 percent in Andhra Pradesh. There hasn't been much of a difference between the 2001 and 2011 census.

Pursuit of education was the reason for 1.8 percent of all the migrations in 2011 compared to 1.1 percent in 2001 for the whole of India. For Andhra Pradesh, the corresponding figure has been 3.7 and 1.8 respectively. The percentage of women migrating to pursue education increases from 0.4 (2001) to 1.0 (2011) for the whole of India. In Andhra Pradesh, in 2001, 0.8 percent of the women migrated for education and this figure increased to 2.5 in 2011. This is a little more than a 300 percent increase.

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¹ The figures in this note refer to the undivided Andhra Pradesh state. Figures for Telangana and Andhra would have to be looked at after the 2021 census.

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City of Hope

■ Mithun Som

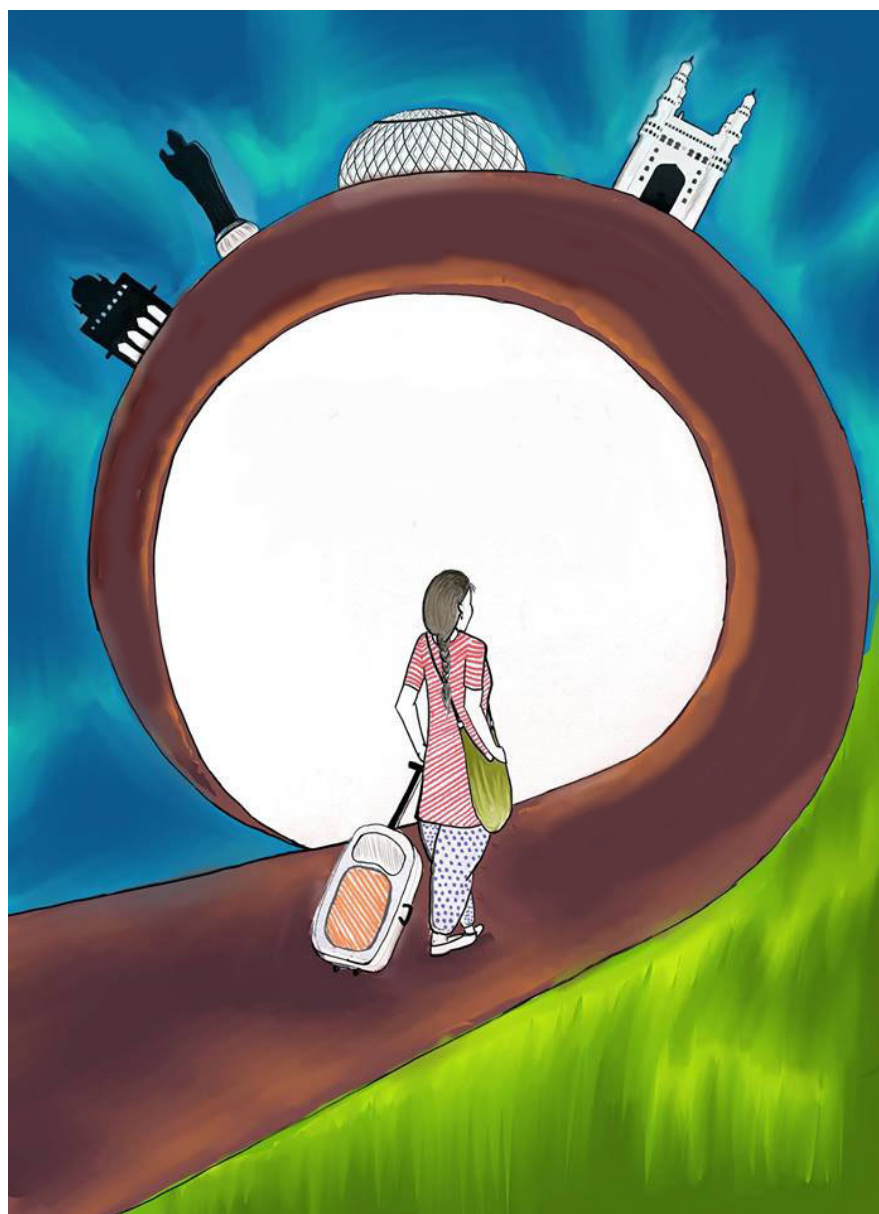
Sitting in her small glass partitioned office within her home, Kamala cuddles her labrador, and talks about her journey from a small town in central India to Hyderabad, from being a door to door saleswoman to being a real estate businesswoman. As her flat mates whom she calls her own family, left for their office and her help cleaned the house, Kamala talked about her coming out as a lesbian and her entry into real estate.

In a small hostel room made of plywood partitions, with four beds in a row, the bare minimum space to move around and no ventilation, Lipika talks about her story of coming from a coastal district of Andhra to Hyderabad. She talks about her engineering studies, her internship stint in ISRO and then now working in a small office in...

Smriti sits comfortably in the sofa of her small front room in her house, as her mother makes tea and pakodas for us and her son and some other small children play in the front of their house. She talks about her journey from being raised by a single parent in a small place in Andhra; working as a coolie at times to augment her mother's income; coming to Hyderabad as she got a coveted job in a big media house; meeting her husband to be, getting married, and her passion for the job.

Sarada and Sirisha, the two sisters talk to us in their small room, as they also keep an eye on the rice being cooked on a small cylinder stove. They talk about their father's ill health and not being able to earn money, about their decision of coming to the city to look for work, their work in an upscale departmental store and their life in the city.

Women have been migrating after marriage. Even today, migration due to marriage forms



the main reason why women migrate. However, in recent times, there is an increase in women migrating to the city for other reasons like work and education. Though this is a very small proportion of the overall women who are migrating, this is a significant category (Refer box item).

It is pertinent to note here that even though women always constituted the majority of the migrant population, because of the nature of their migration (after marriage) they are not viewed as 'primary' migrants, but rather as following the normal and expected course of their lives. Girls are brought up with the understanding that their parents' home is temporary and that they belong to their marital home. In popular imagination, it is always the men who migrate in search of better pastures. Even in international academic literature, women's migration was not given enough importance till the 1980s.

Therefore, the arrival of this small category of women coming for work and education

poses a significant shift. Firstly, in the way migrants are imagined and secondly, of women migrating and staying alone in the city. It breaks the norm of women moving from their parental home to marital home. This small window when they are not under the guardianship of family and relatives produces a certain anxiety in the fabric of society to "control women's sexuality". In this scenario, the various educational institutes, residential spaces and public spaces try to act as de facto guardians and impose rules and regulations.

The question therefore is, are the different spaces in the city like educational and job institutions, the residential spaces, public transport and public spaces of normal urban life geared to make way for these women? Is this increase in the number of women migrating to city reflected in their inclusion in the urban lexicon? Will it include them in the discussions of policy and of urban planning? A city like Hyderabad, is seen as a neoliberal success story – an IT and pharma

hub that attracts scores of migrant women. Will this city accommodate the needs of these women?

To probe these questions, one needs to understand why these women come to the city. What does the city promise them? I look at this here, focusing on women who have come alone to the city of Hyderabad for work or education. In this context I explore the various factors which bring the women to the city. My essay is based on the research project of the City and Sexuality team of Anveshi, as part of which fifty women were interviewed from different backgrounds and in different vocations in Hyderabad.

Hyderabad, the City

Hyderabad is a city which has welcomed migrants, not just from the country but from other parts of the world in its 400 plus year history. Presently, about 24 percent of the present population in Hyderabad is migrant (census, 2011). The most recent surge of migration to Hyderabad has been in the 2000s.

It started with the kind of city centric development that took place in (erstwhile) Andhra Pradesh especially after the 1990s. The economic reforms and the political change in terms of the formation of a coalition government in the centre gave more power to the regional parties and to the states to pursue their economic policies. As the states got more autonomy, competition to get investors in their state grew. Service, and Information Communication and Technology (ICT) industries with infrastructure led development was an area which was also expected to grow fast. Other factors like supportive political change, technological advances, locational advantage in terms of time zones, lower wages, English language competency helped the growth of ICT and BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) in the urban areas of the country (Raju and Jatrana, 2016).

Andhra Pradesh saw the highest growth in this sector during early 2000s (Kennedy 2007). This also spiralled the increase of auxiliary business and services. To attract the investors, Hyderabad or rather a part of Hyderabad was projected as a global city with better roads, power, and other services. City centric projects that rely on huge infrastructure was given precedence. Large subsidies and concessions in land, labour laws, infrastructure, were provided. These policies

brought in many big companies. This was interpreted as the success of the state (Kennedy 2007, Kamat 2011). However, other parts of the state, did not see such development and in fact the state lowered its investment in the agrarian sector (Reddy and Mishra 2010). Power and other services were diverted to Hyderabad at the cost of other districts of Andhra Pradesh.

This new face of the city also needed many people to work. The city needed the migrants to become a global city. The state had a substantial number of educated skilled workforce waiting to be absorbed in this sector from its numerous private engineering colleges. These engineering and medical colleges were set up from the agricultural surplus of coastal Andhra region which benefited from the green revolution. This was largely aided by the networks of Kamma and Reddy castes along with state support in terms of heavily subsidized land grants and other infrastructural support. With the growth of IT sector and outsourcing of services, "these private institutions were able to step in as the supply chain for technical labour for the global service industry" (Kamat 2011,194). Hyderabad is also known for its private medical care and education institutes. It is one of the first cities to expand privatized hospital care.

For many people from smaller districts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Hyderabad became the city of their dreams. The number of educational institutes, coaching centres, software and allied industries made this a desirable destination for young and educated migrants not only from the state but from other states as well.

Though our study focused on women who had come for a job and education, we found that different factors interplayed and there was no single narrative. We tried looking at the predominating reasons for their coming to the city.

Job and education opportunities

The villages and towns cannot cater to growing middle class aspirations either in education or in jobs resulting in mass migration to the major cities in India every year. The presence of numerous educational institutes and job opportunities drove many women to Hyderabad. As not many opportunities available elsewhere in the state, Hyderabad became the dream destination for people in Andhra and

Telangana. Anika explains this saying, back in her hometown, success is recognized if children stay in Hyderabad. She says, *"Hyderabad was a passion because my parents and all my neighbours respected you if you study in Hyderabad (shaan samajte). So even though I got campus accommodation in Kakatiya (University), I chose to study in Hyderabad in a normal college. Because of this passion, I came".* Working or studying in Hyderabad meant that the person has arrived.

It was assumed that if you work hard and put enough effort, you can succeed in a big city. Smriti says, *"because it is a huge city we have more opportunities. If we want to do anything, we can do it here, so many opportunities are there.....I have some confidence. I want a profession in which if I put hard work, career growth will be there. So, I chose Hyderabad for my career growth and personal growth".*

However, with the bifurcation of erstwhile Andhra Pradesh, things are changing now as Sonia puts it, that when she came 10 years back, Hyderabad was the only option, now other cities like Vishakhapatnam are coming up but at that time, it was understood that after doing engineering, one has to go to Hyderabad. *"It was normal,"* she said.

Women also came from other states and they either explored or thought about other options as well before deciding about Hyderabad. Kamala coming from a town from central India says, that her place is good for education but there is no scope for her kind of jobs over there. She started her career in Pune and then came to Hyderabad.

Even as these women coming from relatively better off families, came for better avenues of work, there were women for whom getting a job was an economic necessity.

Economic necessity

There were women belonging to less well to do families who needed to work to support their homes. Most of these women, having finished at least their schooling, came from villages which did not provide any avenue of work for these women. So these women came out and started working as mall workers, nurses etc. As they send about 70-80 percent of their income back to their villages, it becomes the primary income for their families.

Sarada- Sirisha are two sisters from a village in Warangal. Their father fell sick and was no longer capable of earning. So these two

sisters came to Hyderabad looking for work, and a cousin of theirs helped them. One sister has a bachelor's degree and another has passed her twelfth class. They got a job as a cashier and as a saleswoman in one of the fancy departmental store. Together they make 16,000 rupees per month of which they keep just 4000 rupees for themselves and send the rest home. Their life in the city is mainly standing for 10 hours in the store, coming back, cooking and sleeping. The off day that they get is devoted to household chores and getting the much-needed rest.

Ana finished her nursing course and having no opportunities in the village shifted to Hyderabad where she joined a private hospital. She along with her sisters send most of their income back home to their parents, keeping the bare minimum to survive for themselves.

Their coming to the city is to help their family survive.

Political disturbances

The political disturbances in some of the states in India like Kashmir, and the North Eastern states also led to migration. Women coming to Hyderabad from these states found Hyderabad to be a safe destination and had numerous opportunities. Conflict in their home state have resulted in the severe restriction of education and job options. They could not see any future there. Rafia came from a northern state of India. Her father had been killed when she was very young. She came to a central university to do her PhD as a PhD in her home state can take anything between five to eight years depending on the situation. She explains the situation, she says, *"One thing in my home university was that the maximum time, the maximum for M.Phil. is three years but that continues for another three to four years. Then think, how long the Ph.D. will take. I told mother this thing that imagine if I do my M.Phil., Ph.D. here, then it will continue till 2020. then when will I start working?.....Generally, the problem there is that tomorrow is your exam and today the situation is bad (halat kharab ho gayi) then there is total shut down. So, because of these issues, the condition is like that. This is why my mother allowed me to come here"*.

Pritibala coming from Assam talks about the ethnic conflict that gripped her hometown in 2003. She says, *"first it was a conflict between the militant groups of these communities and then later even the commoners were massacred. And even they started seeing this as a war between the*

two communities. It affected all of us". She talks about the way this affected their lives, she said, *"I still remember that this created a lot of tension and rift and a lot of suspicion, even between my school friends"*. She had no plans but had to move to the capital city in her state for her plus two. Talking about her friends in her hometowns, she said, *"many of us, I think 90% of the population moved to Guwahati because of the conflict, to pursue their higher education"*. She later came to Hyderabad for higher education, as her father did not want to send her to Delhi.

Abuse at home

City for some women also becomes the safe space, not just from their home state, but at times from their own homes. A few women narrated abusive experience at their own homes or in relationships and were looking for a way out. The city provided them that space where they could start with their new lives. Akansha being the unwanted girl child of her parents, had faced abuse at her home. She was asked to fend for herself after her schooling and she decided to move out of that place. Her parents didn't support her financially after school, she said, *"till 12 they did, after that they stopped. I will have to do it myself. I never got any support from my family. No mental support, no financial support"*. Akansha talks about her parents reaction when she wanted to move out, *"They didn't say yes, they didn't say no. They were like you do whatever you want to do. It is your responsibility and headache"*.

Shinjini was an orphan and was not treated well by her uncle and aunt with whom she stayed. After having being thrown out along with her grandmother, she found her way to Hyderabad to an orphanage through someone she knew. Having no one to go to, she could only think of Hyderabad.

Finding one's identity

Hadasy talks about her desire to come to a city, she says, *"I wanted to be free. Like I didn't want constant pressure from family and friends and relatives to act a certain way. Like I wanted to discover myself. Like 'who am I?' That question no; like at home I must be a particular person.... Be a good daughter. Be a good sister. Be a good granddaughter. You know, I just wanted to remove all those... those labels and then explore, figure out what I am"*.

Women like Hadasy want to come out of their parent's home and live alone to understand their selves. They believed that

moving to a new place will help them to develop themselves and give them the confidence. This need for an independent identity and sometimes the need to broaden their horizon and experience the city life living alone brought them to city and education or job were the medium through which they came.

Monika talks about her moving out, she says, *"If once we go out from our native place, we will certainly get something. We will improve our communication skills, we will improve our education also. I came here to Hyderabad at the age of 16 years so I was very young at that time and I was innocent and ignorant at that time. And I after coming to Hyderabad, I started observing people, what do they do and what do they want to do in their life. And now I have the confidence and if you leave me anywhere in the world, I can come back. I have got the courage (himmat) now after coming to Hyderabad. So, I really feel a craze about Hyderabad"*.

City gives hope

Even as these women have different reasons, the single thread that brings them here is the hope for a better opportunity and a better life. Does their migration actually lead to a better life? This depends on several things.

The first is the social and cultural baggage with which they arrive in the city: their caste, class, region and religion. Their location determines the kind of opportunities they can avail. For example, the educated middle class with training and confidence try and get into the high paying jobs like those in the software industry. Aspiring women with fewer class-cultural assets, but who have completed a professional degree, try to hone their skills by entering the coaching centres to get a better job. Women having no financial back up from home and whose families are dependent on them for their income, look for any opening they might get, be it malls, beauty parlours and only after a while, can they even afford to think of ways to better their career.

As the woman tries to break her boundaries and push further her aspirations may change with time with more exposure to the city and its people. What women do and how far they go depends on a complex of factors, their interaction with the institutions, their support network (both old and new), exposure to a different life, etc. The way the city accepts these women and allows them to explore and fully utilise its resources has a

bearing on the lives of these women. Does the city provide them equal access to its educational and work spaces, public transport, residential spaces and its public spaces? Not yet. There is the social-patriarchal anxiety of women living alone, of control of their sexuality and this anxiety is packaged in the discourse of safety and security.

In one of the central universities and a state university, women students have been asking for the removal of their curfew timings in the hostel so that they can access the university library which their male counterparts use till late in the night. In Delhi, the PinjraTod campaign have raised the question of charging higher rates for women's hostels in the name of providing security. Single women in our study have talked about the difficulty in finding a house to rent in certain localities. However, at times, paying extra money for rent can resolve this issue. This implies that money can help trump the anxiety of a single woman living in the neighbourhood. (Rani Rohini Raman in her article have further explored this issue).

So even as women from different social locations land up in the city, does the city provide the same treatment to all? For example, while a free she-shuttle service is available in certain areas of the city for a certain class of women, it is not available for the mall workers or the GHMC workers or for women in other low paid jobs. Certain areas in the city are more accommodating to migrant women as their presence has boosted the IT sector and the economy. This is seen in the mushrooming of accommodations for single women in these areas. Within the constraints, these upper class-caste women have a higher access to the city and its resources.

It is important to note that the exposure to the city and living independently does not mean that the woman has full control over all spheres of her life: for example, even if she can decide to a certain extent about her career choices, the same may not be true for her marriage. However, her exposure to the city does give her confidence, she is able to live her life outside the protection of home and learns to take her own decisions. The question is whether she is able to continue with this new change that has been brought about by her new life in the city. Apart from the social and cultural capital she

accumulates, it is also dependent on what kind of support structure she has and the kind of networking she develops and retains, her sense of belongingness and comfort she feels in the city.

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A room of one's own? Single women in Hyderabad

■ Rani Rohini Raman



Introduction

Growth in urbanization sees more and more single men and women migrating to the towns and cities for study and work. Though they are integral to the 'growth story' of new India very little attention has been paid to their quotidian experience of finding a place to live in the city. Suspicion, scrutiny of their conduct and actions and direct discrimination marks their experience of living as single young people. While both men and women face similar problems, these practices have divergent impact on men and women.

Campaigns such as Why Loiter (see interview with Pinjra Tod and Madhurima Majumdar's essay in this volume) have consistently highlighted the gendered nature of public spaces in contemporary India. Several urban activist networks have highlighted lack of public toilets and proper street lights. A certain masculine gaze marks women who loiter in the public spaces as 'sexually available, restricts women's ability to legitimately claim public space. On a different note, Lukose (2009) showed that young men and women in the public educational spaces present themselves as consumer citizens in the post-liberalization world. However young women from poorer and non-dominant caste background get excluded from the public domain even in this reframed citizenship.

How does gender work in the residential spaces of the city? We have very few accounts of gendered dimension of residential spaces in big cities. Melkote and Tharu's 1985 study of two working women hostels in Hyderabad had discussed the day to day scrutiny which was the norm that women residents faced. Pinjra Tod campaigns amply demonstrated that such gender differentiated surveillance continues to be the norm in university hostels across the country. The film, 'Bachelor Girls' (made by Shikha Makan) documented the tortuous experiences of metropolitan and upper middle class young single women in the City of Mumbai. It showed that the severe restrictions on their mobility and surveillance on the conduct demonstrate the hostility of even the most advanced urban space to the presence of single young women.

What does this hostility indicate? Is there a continuum of surveillance between the public and the residential places? How does it affect single women's mobility and life? Who bears the costs of such surveillance? And what does it tell us about the gender of the city?

Four Locations, four experiences: Day-to-day negotiations of young migrant women in Hyderabad

The following statements were made to us in the course of interviews to understand experiences of young migrant women to the City of Hyderabad. Hyderabad is a city

known for its Nawabi culture; for being the epicentre for separate Telangana movement, in which university students had played a crucial role and for being an IT sector hub which attracts thousands of youngsters every year. Each of these women 'belonged' to the city's advertised faces and was trying to access different kinds of residential spaces such as university hostels, private hostels, PG accommodation and rented flats. Each brings into focus the gendered particularity of these imaginaries of Hyderabad. They make us ask if women were thought to be part of these different imaginaries or sought to be incorporated in this particular manner.

#1. "It was terrible. As I told you earlier mostly they asked questions like what do you do and who is going to stay with you? So there was this junior who was looking for a house because his younger brother was coming to stay with him so we kind of went around together looking for the house and everybody assumed that he was my boyfriend. I was like, look at him? He is 100 years younger than I was. Even if he was, you can not ask such things directly from people, it was like *rishta kya hai?* (what is the relation?) If you are staying then it is 8000. I said that but the broker said it is 5000 They said but no if YOU people are staying it is 8000. We will keep our eyes closed if you pay us 3000 extra every month." - Anindita, a PhD scholar.

Anindita, who studies in one of the central universities of Hyderabad, narrated this incident that occurred during house hunting

near her university. As a migrant student from West Bengal she initially stayed in the campus. When the administration changed accommodation provisions without a proper discussion with the students, Anindita and several other PhD scholars were asked to leave their single seated rooms or were asked it to share with one or two more students. PhD being a stage of research where researchers need space of their own, Anindita decided to shift out of the campus. During her interview, she also discussed how her lifestyle and vision towards world had changed after she had joined the university. She had become vocal after realising that she needed to express her opinions. Campus life had also taught her that gender segregation is forced by society. Campus spaces broke such strict segregation even though it sometimes enhanced it too. That was the reason why she didn't think twice before house hunting with one of her male juniors. In this background, when she had to go through the grilling in the process of house hunting, she was outraged to see the scrutiny university students faced. She also shared with us the experiences of her friends, where such scrutinies got multiplied due to caste, religion and race of the students.

Her narrative highlights the type of gaze that university students face in residential spaces. She was assumed to be the partner of her male junior, thereby reducing her chances of getting a house cheaply. It is well known that the presence of these migrant students creates an 'abnormal' space in otherwise so-called 'normal' atmosphere of the residential areas near these universities. These localities become the beneficiaries of increased commercial activity by catering to the needs of such students in the form of small eateries, second hand bookshops, and used cloth shops. But the local residents maintain their 'normalizing' gaze on these these abnormal women, claiming to accommodate them only for economic reasons.

#2. *Nothing happened in the hostel but I faced the situation in the city once or twice. When we got late in the night while returning to the hostel.. Like when we went to Charminar and were returning to the hostel. Sometimes it would be 7 or 7.30 PM. I am speaking of a month ago.. A friend and I were returning and heard this comment (from the men*

standing there). 'Look at these women from the Urdu University who are out late in the evening. Women now have got too much freedom" -Rafath, a student from a central university in Hyderabad.

Rafath, a student from another central university shared her narrative of being judged by local community around her university. The comment "*Urdu university ki ladkiyon ko bahut chutt mil gayi hai*" did not judge Rafath and her friend as two individuals. Their act of being 'late' was seen as lack of control exercised by their university. This university distinguishes itself from other central universities in the city for having very strict hostel timings for women students. They need to return to the hostel from classes before 6 PM. In the recent past, the women students agitated for flexible hostel timings to avail library and other academic facilities. A few students, including women, were punished by the administration for raising these concerns.

Given this background, one needs to understand the anxieties among the local residents to ensure that 'these girls' are kept in control by the university administration. Borrowing from Hubbard (2012), one can argue that these women students are seen as unattached sexualised bodies by the local residents. The presence of such unattached women creates a threat to the balanced 'order' of the society where each woman is placed in a familial or community setup. Women who access the city space independently can give rise to such aspirations among the local women who are bound by the home rules. It is such a logic that seems to guide the controlling gaze of local residents.

#3. *People from this place had called. They actually called my friend and my friend called bhaiya (elder brother). So I spoke to bhaiya and told him the exact circumstances. I told him that it was also raining and there was a small shed for pressing clothes. So I told Kiran, my friend who was with me, that since it was raining, wait for a while then go. So he waited and didn't even sit down because he thought people might think he was (or we were) doing something wrong. He left after the rain stopped. By that time bhaiya got to of know this and he called. He said that some third person told him about me standing with a boy in that shed, and so he was hurt; and that I had told him then it would*

have been better. I said yes, I accept my fault that it was raining and I told him to wait for a while then go. So bhaiya said okay. Neither I nor my bhaiya liked it that a third person had told him". - Radha a resident of a low budget private hostel in Hyderabad.

Radha belonged to a business family and had the option of joining the business after completing her engineering degree. But she chose to come to Hyderabad in search of an independent identity. As the conversation indicates, this incident occurred when she asked one of her male colleagues to drop her and had to wait under some shelter with him as it was raining. By the time rain had stopped and her male colleague had left, her brother got to know about it as one of Radha's hostel mates had called him informing about the 'situation'. Radha's brother then gave her a 'brotherly' call to alert her of her duty to inform him of her whereabouts.

It's this self-surveillance that made Radha regret asking her male friend to wait and not informing her brother about it. As a woman who chose to come to the city over staying back with the family business, the idea of gossip about herself was so traumatic that she blamed herself. Even though she didn't like the fact that, that her hostel mate informed her brother, she chose not to confront her.

Radha, like many other women saw her move to a bigger city in search of their identity as a 'gift' from their parents. This keeps them in a deep sense of gratitude and indebtedness that they don't want to do anything 'wrong' that might hurt their parents. This self-surveillance is supplemented by the control and gaze inside private hostel spaces where she stayed. Hostel wardens and in this case hostel residents also act as the voice of women's parents. Small acts like talking to a male colleague are seen as a 'breach of trust' towards the parents. More than administrative control, as found in university hostels, its the moral control that seems to endorse the inner guilt felt by Radha.

#4. *"I remember once.... I think he (the house owner) used to stay in Mehdiapatnam. When he used to come to this side of the city, to the house next door or next building which belonged to his*

cousin, and they used to drink together. There was a small room down the stairs from our flat where they used to drink. So there were quite a few times when me or my roommate were going down, that the owner came and asked "chalo madam join kar lo hum log ko" (come join us for drinks). He told me once "aa jao madam, pi lo hamare sath, aap log to pite hi ho". (since you drink come and join us for drinks). He used to look us in a certain way because we drink and smoke." -Sangeeta, a corporate worker in Hitech city of Hyderabad.

Sangeeta had come to Hyderabad to study MBA and later joined a multinational company in Hyderabad. While talking about her experience of the city, she described how she constantly felt as an 'outsider', whether it's her office or at the residential places where she stayed. She insisted that there is a widely prevalent notion in the city that such 'outside' women are of a certain moral type and can therefore be treated 'differently'. She said that the office did not think it important to arrange safe transportation for her as it was assumed that she can manage 'on her own'. It is precisely the same reason her landlord wanted to join him for drinks and smoke as she was seen as a woman who is free and has nobody to control them.

Sangeeta's narrative forces us to see the issues that single women in the city face for 'being on their own'. Many women in our study shared their feeling that staying away from home brings a sense of independence and freedom, where they can lead their life according to their own will and follow their aspirations. They want to be seen as independent women who can look after themselves. However, the same single status also brought in the sexualized gaze where their independence is seen as being sexually available.

The new moral guardians: The anxiety to control

When Hubbard (2012) argues that unregulated sexualities in any city create an imagined danger, such dangers are mapped onto the bodies of the migrant single women who have come to the city with their own dreams and aspirations. Such dreams and aspirations to study and work that fit the growth narrative of these cities are

welcomed, but when these get reflected in a changed lifestyle, relationship choices and new mode of conduct, different social structures in the cities take over the role of 'guardians' to establish the 'order' of the city. It appears as if the larger society takes over from the family to control these women.

We can see that landlords, hostel owners, hostel-mates play this role at an everyday level and universities and other such institutions also taking over as the custodians of single migrant women. It became even more clear during the random hostel checking in universities like HCU and JNU that not only is the sexuality of young people vilified but that the university retains the right to be the guardian of the students in the absence of their family members. In a recent incident, video footage was taken as 'proof of unseemly' conduct of the young woman to her family members. In another well known incident at MANNU, one of the female students who had raised the issue of hostel and library timings was called an 'agent' of the *Pinjra Tod* movement implying a paid trouble maker. Bizarre arguments are used to trivialise the concerns of young women students.

Such attitudes of private hostels and university administration also cannot be seen in isolation. In recent years public vigilantism against publicly visible modern women and youth has increased manifold, be it the public humiliation of a pub-going woman in Guwahati or the previous attack on pub-going women by the Sri Ram Sene or Telugu TV channels following women inside bars/pubs or Operation Romeo in UP or the outrage in Kerala against kissing in public. Such daily acts of vigilantism against modern youth, especially against single and independent women have become 'normalized'. Its only in this wider context that the experiences of single migrant women such as Anindita, Radha, Rafath and Sangeeta who face crude, subtle or shrewd scrutiny can be placed. It is the determination and struggle of these women, which seems to be negotiating a wider space for themselves and others in cities like Hyderabad, even though neither the cities nor its structures seem to be ready to welcome the single women like them.

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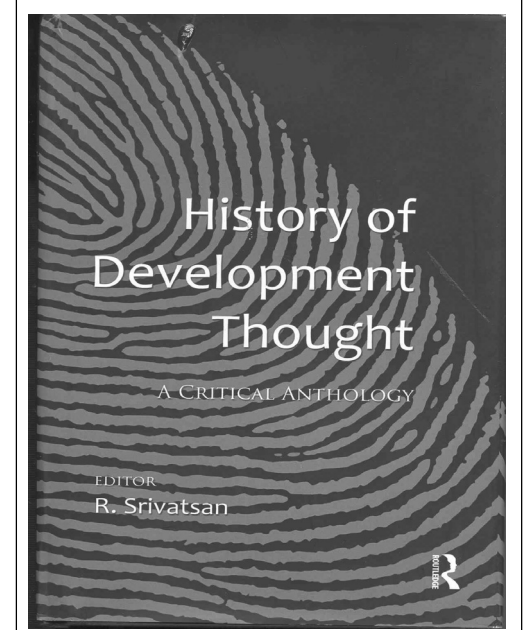
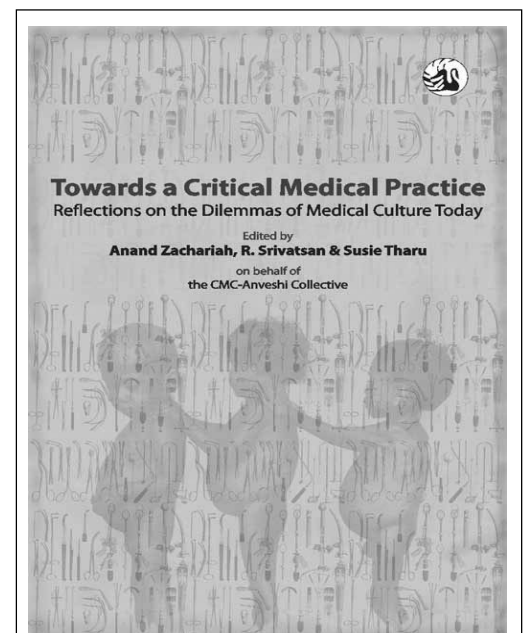
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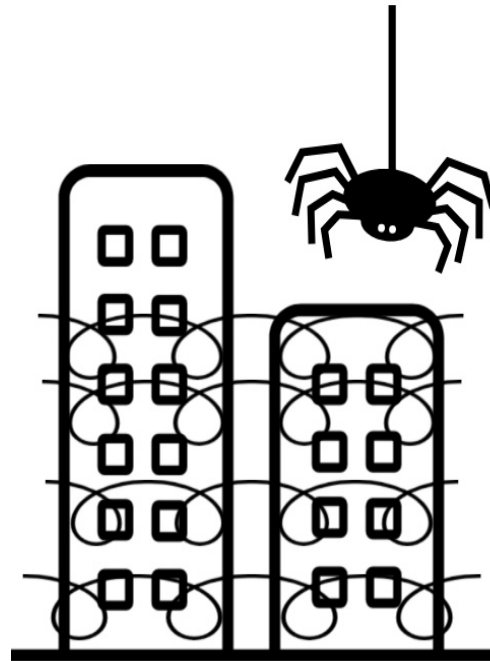
Bloodshed in the Bathroom

(a short story)

■ Subhadra Joopaka

Our hostel building was the one and only *pucca* hostel building the government built for girls in Warangal. All the other social welfare hostels were rented. These were usually either old houses with low tiled roofs or flat roofed concrete houses. Like cattle driven into cattle sheds, children were crammed into the hostels, into tiny pigsty rooms with no ventilators and hardly any bathrooms to speak of. Every morning was a battle for water, for food and for the bathrooms. You had to be up at four thirty in the morning to use the toilet, have a bath and get ready. If you woke up a few minutes too late you'd be lucky to find a mug of water to take to the toilet. Where there is a public hand pump somewhere close to the hostel, two girls bring a bucket of water back together and that's all they have for bathing and everything else. If there is no hand pump, then you used the waste water from the kitchen, left over from washing the rice and vegetables. No wonder most social welfare kids have scabies and skin sores! Walk past a social welfare hostel anytime anyday and you can catch a fight between pigs and dogs – perhaps they are fighting for their rightful share! This is the social welfare scene.

The two-storied *Balasamudram* hostel Compared to the other rented hostels, has all the facilities a hostel needs. The ground floor houses school girls from class 2 to 10 and the first floor houses college girls. There is plenty of water – a 24 hour supply! It has a large barren compound fenced in by a wall. Intermediate, degree, vocational students and teacher-trainees, some 30 odd girls, all live together in six rooms on the first floor. But



all the toilets are on the ground floor, to be shared between the school and college girls.

I was lucky to get a seat here. I was so thrilled. I dreamed all day about building temples of knowledge and spending all my time studying. I wouldn't have to waste my energies worrying about food and water and toilets and bathing. Before I left for the hostel to join intermediate, my father sat me down and said, "*Bidda*, I married everyone in our family off at the age of seven. I'm educating you because you are the youngest. You go bring me a good name – I don't want to hear someone say that fellow's daughter is 'that kind' of girl. Take care!"

So, college, hostel, my books and a couple of close friends is all that my life revolved around for those couple of years.

One day, when I came back to the hostel from college, all the girls – the young ones and the older ones – were hanging around outside whispering to each other, looking for all the world like someone had just died. I walked up to a group of girls and asked, "What's up *Yakamma*, why is everyone outside? Has something happened to someone?" But before she could reply I overheard the hostel workers talking to each other. "Did you see that *Mallu*? I tell you its so sinful... the

bathroom is full of blood... who has done this? A college girl or school girl? ... I can't figure it out! Obviously, some kid got pregnant and took something to miscarry... I tell you *Lachakka* never trust these educated whores!

Someone replied, "Listen *Ramakka* if you miscarry won't you be exhausted with all the blood loss? But these kids are all running around like headless chicken aren't they?". "Yeah, I guess... no one really looks pale or sickly."

I heard another voice: "whatever... whoever she is she must be pretending like she is ok so that no one figures it out". *Mallakka* the sweeper came towards us beating her chest, crying out loudly "whose fate is so cursed? Is this a sin or an injustice... either way, someone's life is ruined".

Their talk scared us to death. Everyone was so agitated we couldn't even talk to each other. Even the college girls were stunned. We stood there with heavy feet, clinging to each other, not knowing what to do about this mess.

Meanwhile, the *Gurkha* (watchman) brought the hostel warden. Even though nominally there were two wardens for the two hostels – upstairs and downstairs – only the college

hostel warden wielded any real authority. She controlled all the kids in all sorts of ways. She would make us sign declarations that we were fed meat once a week, and dal and vegetables everyday, which of course we weren't! We even had to cook up a perfect attendance record for her. And when the inspections happened we had to stick to the story. To protect herself from the possibility of girls complaining about her she cleverly kept a record of everyone's comings and goings, who had the most male visitors, whose attendance in college was poor, who watches the most movies – all this data she used to make sure we towed the line and kept our mouths shut. That's the kind of woman she was.

So with this new problem on our heads we were all worried – what would this woman do to us now? Who would she tear to pieces? Which one of us would be kicked out of the hostel? We were terrified.

The warden arrived and the hostel workers rushed towards her, “*Namaste amma... namaste namaste...*”. “Its all very well to say *namaste* but what the hell are all of you doing here... letting all this drama happen in the hostel” she replied, peering into the bathrooms as she climbed up the stairs. When she passed us we scattered into small frightened groups and followed her slowly to her room. The warden plonked herself into a chair, and with sprightly sadistic pleasure she called out “*Mallamma* gather all the school girls who have matured... and make sure all the college girls come upstairs as well.” All the college girls stood around looking guilty for no reason. We were scared and anxious and you could see the apprehension on our faces.

The warden looked us up and down, head to toe, piercing into us, sieving through our minds. “*Rajamma* has anyone been looking ill for the past few days?” she asked. “Well... I don't really know *amma...*” “What do you mean you don't really know” said the warden “don't you notice anything when you feed them?” *Rajamma* replied, “Everything is such a mess at meal time madam... we can hardly pay attention to their plates its impossible to pay attention to their faces also... There's always such a rush...”

“Did anyone go home today?” the warden asked. *Rajamma* the assistant cook slowly recollected that *Shantamma* and *Shoshamma* had gone to their villages. “But *Rajakka* aren't they class 3 students... a bit young no?” the warden dripped sarcasm. The other workers laughed half heartedly. “This is no joking matter” she shouted “the hostel's prestige is at stake... the hostel will be ruined and as warden I will have to bear the blame”, as if her honesty and morality were the foundations of the hostel!

She turned to look at us. Girls who come back late to the hostel, those who have a lot of male visitors, those who take pains to dress nicely, those who go out to the movies – they were all suspect in her eyes. She singled them out, gathered them around her, and examined them with a magnifying glass. Thankfully, I was not in her list of usual suspects and I was saved from the interrogation in this round at least. The warden called the others into her room, roared at them, threatened them, and basically conducted a third degree without the help of the police. She said the most insulting things about our castes, poverty, habits, basic needs, even our minds and souls. She ranted and raved for a long time but she still couldn't get at the truth.

“You better confess you know... we will get to the bottom of this and then things can get uncomfortable for you” she threatened. “This will become a big issue in the district, in the state... the press will come, the police will come. What do you think of yourselves... aborting a pregnancy is a simple thing? Other girls will follow your example and then what...” Her words were difficult to digest. We were all quiet, standing there with eyes downcast.

“Whats up *Marthamma* apparently this past month you've hardly been in the hostel?” the warden asked. “No, madam, I've been here in the hostel only” mumbled *Marthamma*. Then the warden turned to *Shakuntala* and asked sarcastically “How about you, have your visitors increased or decreased?” *Shakuntala* just bent her head silently. “*Lakshamma* this is not the way to set them right... tell the *Gurkha* to bring the office jeep”.

We were just about picking up the courage to look up at her with our pale helpless faces when she started again. “The government

gives you so many facilities and this is the nonsense you get upto? You can offer a dog *ghee* and rice but it will still run back to the tannery... what can anyone do! The only way we can find out the truth is to get you all tested in the hospital” she said as she called out for the jeep again. This threat was like pouring boiling oil into our stomachs.

The warden told the workers to get ready before the jeep came, went into her room and shut the door. We quietly filed into our rooms.

I asked a degree student, “*Akka* what was *Madam* saying? I didn't understand...” “What's there not to understand! The tests will bring out the real character of everyone... that's how the bathroom mystery will be solved” she replied, imitating the warden. Another girl added, “Why should we be afraid, we haven't done anything... we can go wherever they take us. Come...”

10th class *Karuna* asked BSc student *Durgakka*, “How do they do this test *akka*?” “What do you mean how? They'll look at our stomachs, strip off our clothes and stick a tester between our legs. That's how” said *Durgakka*. A lot of girls went cold on hearing this. Our stomachs turned. Everyone went quiet.

Neither the school girls nor the college girls had the courage to refuse the test. We knew that if we refused, or protested, this dirty accusation would become our burden to bear. So, we swallowed our anxieties, discomfort, and the thought that we didn't want to get the test done.

The warden's methods were not new to us; after all we had suffered all kinds of humiliation at her hands. If we ever complained that we weren't getting enough vegetables or that the curries were inedible, she would retort, “Look at your face, do you look like you need vegetables... eating raw chilli and rice all your life and now you demand vegetables! Getting used to feasting on government money *huh!*”

When we asked for our pocket money she would taunt, “Who wants your beggar's alms... I'll give it when I have the time.” If anyone ever dared to stand up to her she would find some way of getting them kicked out of the hostel.

Whatever she said and whatever she did we could not defy her – we were helpless because of our insecurity. That day, the thought that she was going to subject our bodies to invasive tests wounded us more than anything else ever had. But we were incapable of protesting. Better to die than live with this kind of accusation on your head. So, everyone silently got ready to go get tested.

I was also getting ready to go, but somewhere in my mind a small strength, a firm self confidence, refused to give in. The easy way out was to go along with everyone else and get tested. After all there is comfort in numbers. The problem is in resisting. Would I be able to deal with the difficulties of defiance? What would my future be if I got kicked out? What would happen to my parents' dreams for me? Would I become the wound on the ox's back for a hundred crows to peck at?

Being a woman herself how could the warden subject us girls to this 'abortion test'? How could I swallow my shame and strip to get tested. After all, all things considered, I am only an intermediate student. Who would care what I did... would anyone stand by me? My mind was in turmoil but a silent courage shone in my stomach 'I won't go to the hospital... come what may.' I recollected stories of bravery, made my mind up, took a deep breath and walked into the degree students' rooms determined to convince the other girls not to go to the hospital either.

Sunandakka saw me and said "Oi! you aren't ready to go? Hurry up..." "I don't feel like going" I replied. "Why?" "I'd rather die than get this test done akka... not just me everyone feels the same way akka. You are older, you are the seniors no... please akka please go talk to madam and tell her not to get these hospital tests done" I pleaded. She looked at me as though I had said something unthinkable. "What are you saying... what's the point of arguing with the pestle once you've stuck your head in the mortar... don't try to act too smart. If we refuse the test we'll get into more trouble. We haven't done anything wrong so why worry about getting tested." Irritated, she continued "Why all that headache... shut up and get ready. Hurry up now." I lost my temper "I don't care, you guys go... I'm not coming."

"Have you lost it? What the hell is wrong with you, if you don't come they'll kick you out of the hostel... use your head" Sunandakka said. "No, I'm not coming akka" I said firmly. I turned away and walked back to my room. Everyone – my roommates and others – asked me with anxious surprise 'So, are you not getting ready?'

The jeep arrived and fifteen girls at a time were packed in and sent to the nearest nursing home. The warden instructed the workers that all the rooms should be scanned for matured school girls and college girls so no one could escape the test. Lakshamma found me sitting in my room and asked suspiciously "What's the matter girl, everyone is going for the test... why are you sitting here?"

"I'm not going" I said in a determined voice. "Ayyo" she said, "but madam won't agree." "I'll tell madam myself, you go" I nearly shouted. My determination grew. Not being in the warden's list of usual suspects strengthened my resolve. I suppose my confidence lay in the fact that she had no hold over me, I had never gotten into her bad books. In minutes everyone in the hostel got to know that I had refused to get tested. The warden and some hostel workers came to my room. I was a little afraid but I stood my ground. "Oh, so it's your highness... behind that innocent face is quite a troublemaker I see" she said.

"Madam, I'm not going to get tested. Everyone in this hostel knows what kind of a person I am. You do what you want, but I am not going to the hospital" I said with all the bravery I could muster. No one had ever stood up to the warden before, and I had hurt her ego by defying her in front of the workers. Like a dog whose ear was cut she squealed loudly "I'll take care of you tomorrow... let's see how you continue in this hostel". She took the workers and went to the hospital.

But, the tests didn't settle the bathroom mystery. That whole issue became foggy and now everyone was only discussing me. I was the bubblegum for everyone to chew. The warden was totally occupied with how to teach me a lesson. The workers also went back home wondering what madam would do the next day. My stomach was feeling

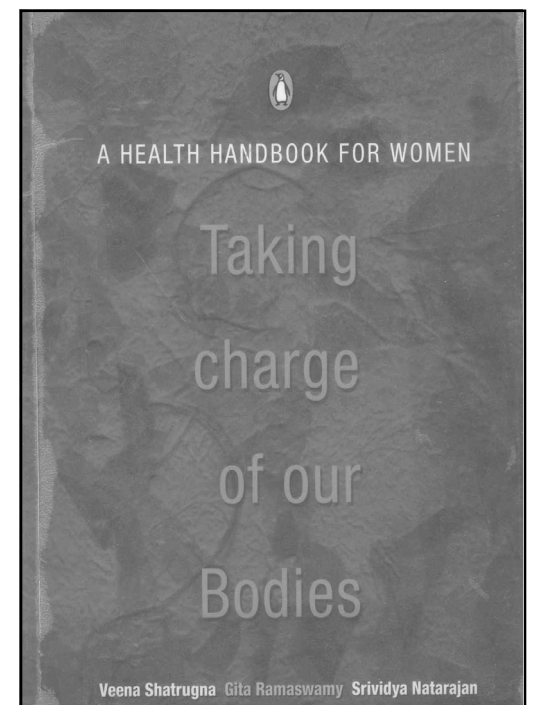
more and more queasy. If the warden put her threats into action what would happen to my studies, what would I tell my mother and father? All the girls were worried about what madam would do to me – no one slept that night. What fires would the warden kindle to have me thrown out of the hostel? The thought worried all of us. A lot of girls cried in the hospital while they were being tested. Others came back and went straight to bed weeping.

Worried about what dawn would bring to the future of my education, I didn't get a wink of sleep. As I began to fall asleep, in the early hours of the morning, I was woken up by a commotion downstairs. It was the hostel workers. "Damn this dog... kick it out... it better not come back this way again..." they were shouting. "Maybe it's this one that mucked up the bathroom yesterday... and today again, right here near the bore well... avvavva... disgusting dog!" Another voice said, "if we had only known that the dog was the culprit. How much those girls suffered, so much humiliation and all that public interrogation, all for what!"

Shubadra Joopaka is a long time associate of Anveshi. She works in Telangana Government.

(A later version of this story was published in K Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, eds. *Steel Nibs are Sprouting: New Dalit Writing from South India*, Noida: Harper Collins, 2013).

Translated from Telugu by Diia Rajan



Breaking the Chains: understanding the “Pinjra Tod” Campaign



■ Email interview by Rani Rohini Raman

Pinjra Tod is a collective of women staying in different hostels of Delhi, against the discriminatory hostel rules and regulations.

Q: Women's hostels have been operating in this manner for quite long. How did you think of this kind of a campaign? Which issues prompted you to respond? Who took the initiative? What were the first issues that you raised? Where did this campaign begin?

Pinjra Tod as a movement isn't the first such agitation against hostel rules and regulations, or patriarchal practices that are embedded in the University. In fact, there have been several protests in the past, most recent ones being the one in Ramjas in 2009 and St Stephens' College in 2013 (colleges of Delhi University). As such, there was a group of students, especially women students, who had come in contact with each other through other such protests/political engagements in the city, say for instance, the 'Kiss of Love' protest or the 'Shuddh Desi Romance' on the 14th of Feb, 2015 and the Come and See the

Blood on my Skirt.

In July of 2015, a notice by Jamia administration caused a major uproar. They were cancelling the 'night outs' for women students (Night outs are days on which you can go out, and not come back to the hostel, with prior permission which involves several kinds of processes from letters, to faxes from parents to SMSs from the registered phone number of the 'father'). This triggered a series of responses, a powerful open letter by a woman student from Jamia hostel, and a suo moto notice by Delhi Commission for Women. Some of us, realising that the media attention and the notice could be a crucial moment to push for this, and also that the selective attention to Jamia smacked of bias against the minority institution, started by making a Facebook page, a signature petition towards a Jan Sunwai at JantarMantar and by publishing anonymous stories of women hostellers from across the Universities in Delhi. The demands for that first Jan Sunwai, included issues such as removal of curfews and deadlines, practices of having a Local

guardian (most people do not have 'married', above 30, male relatives who can become local guardians in the city who will be willing to go through the bureaucracies of late nights and night outs and other disciplinary proceedings of the women's hostel every week), of increasing hostel seats and providing seats as per need and not merit, ending the daily humiliation and moral policing, and having an elected sexual harassment complaints redressal mechanism in place.

Pinjra Tod also pushed for regularization of private accommodation, PGs abound around the University area with exorbitant rent. These demands, the stories on the Facebook page, the first night march and the Jan Sunwai really helped us to get in touch with people across campuses and there was one Whatsapp group initially which would be one important place to coordinate etc. Over the two years, these networks have come to be more extended, and structured so to say, in terms of regular meetings and specific colleges being able to undertake their own activities and articulate campus specific demands as well.

Q: Do you see hostel locks/rules as symbolic of gender discrimination in the society? Do you see breaking of the hostel locks as crucial in challenging gender discrimination in campuses?

The curfew is not the beginning or the end of gender discrimination in the University. Several questions are to be addressed to truly address the same. Pinjra Tod as a movement and with a set of demands works towards not just doing away with the curfew, but to offer space for an articulation of an alternative collective politics of women students, making space for a collective of women students to articulate and shape their politics while also building a support structure for them. The movement has also been a space from which one has been able to participate, engage and critique other student movements that have been challenging the university structure, be it Occupy UGC or the Justice for Rohith Vemula movement, or protests against the persistent attack on the University itself. More importantly, the movement has allowed us to engage and struggle with the various fissures and hierarchies, successes and failure of the women's movements and of the

varied meanings and manifestations of the category of 'woman' itself. The experience has been humbling and inspiring, and we continue to learn from the same.

As such, our articulation of gender discrimination is rooted in the understanding that the curfew is a reflection of the brahmanical patriarchal anxiety around women's sexuality and autonomy. The University actually perpetuates the same structures and seeks to infantilise women and works to inhibit their ability to make decisions. We have been challenging the University on their bogus logic of protectionism and safety, while it actively does not have sexual harassment redressal mechanisms in place. These practices are also unconstitutional for it undermines women's mobility, and acts as a conduit between the father and the husband, seeking to preserve the 'chastity' of women students as it were. And these practices are rampant across Universities.

This fight against the curfew, for more affordable accommodation and redressal mechanisms signals a battle for women's autonomy, collectivisation, and the ability for them to take control of their lives and for collective bargaining with patriarchal structures that be. Brahminism and patriarchy creates the dichotomy of the 'public' and the 'private', where the 'good Brahmin woman is supposed to remain in the domain of the 'private', and this is contrasted with the Dalit or Adivasi woman, who is simultaneously castigated and fetishized for being "promiscuous", "immoral", "bad", due to her participation in the 'public' sphere, on streets, in work. These are roles already determined for us as women by the dominant structures and are designed to suit their interest in either case. A good example is the recent change in labour law 'allowing' women workers to work the night shift which was earlier not allowed. Who does it benefit? Why is the system, which is so hell bent on keeping some women locked up after dark at the same time wanting to have some women be out at night? The logic behind such a law and our curfews is actually the same. Women are to either be out on the streets or locked in their homes/hostels, as per the convenience of the system, depending on what use they have of our bodies and lives - as workers to

clean the streets and sweat in factories, or as repositories of their 'honour' and safeguarding their class-caste privilege.

Our fight for the streets has to hence also strongly emphasize that it is also integrally a fight against caste and capitalism as it is against patriarchy. In fact the control over women's bodies expressed in the curfew is rooted in Brahminical patriarchy which cages women inside 'homes/hostels/PGs' and this fight has to dismantle the private/public binary most definitely.

Q: Do you think just by the modification of hostel rules things will be okay? How will you reconcile the issue of mobility for women and safety at the same time in the present scenario?

As mentioned above, the removal of curfew hasn't been an isolated demand. This demand has been raised from the understanding that women as adults have the right to mobility and that women are able to make decisions for themselves. CCTV cameras and caging women will not help in solving the problem of sexual harassment or violence. In fact, central to this articulation has been the fact that when more women come out on the streets and take public transportation, streets become safer and feel safer. Because it is also about women feeling confident enough to navigate spaces. Often, women students are forced to take routes that they don't feel safe in/about just to get to hostel on time.

Therefore, this logic of protectionism and safety is not going to take us anywhere, but building effective and transparent mechanisms for redressal, more street lights on frequently used streets, safer and affordable public transportation go a longer way in combating sexual violence. It is also to be said that all the myth making about public spaces being unsafe for women is not quantified by statistics. In fact, most women continue to face abuse and violence at the hands of their family or people they know. The battle against sexual harassment and violence perhaps needs to be fought foremost within the familiar contours of the intimate and the familial.

Q: The reports from various universities tell us that experiences of girls, who choose to move freely in the night, were not that much pleasant. What is the immediate challenge in the event of hostel rules, hopefully, getting relaxed?

Sexual harassment is rampant in Universities, as it is outside. Often, women who transgress patriarchal codes are also punished for doing so. In the case of lack of support structures, women's vulnerability is further accentuated. Pinjra Tod as a movement has been providing an alternative imagination even as it pushes for its demands. Night marches are one such space, wherein women marching together at night on the same streets where they are forbidden to be after certain hours.

And then, violence does not simply occur when women go out after certain hours, but also in more systemic ways. For instance, though the library does not have differential timings for men and women students. But because of the curfews, women cannot access the library after certain hours. If one does, she is stared at, made to feel uncomfortable and chased out collectively. It would be important to normalise women's presence in these 'forbidden' spaces and making it more accessible and democratic.

Q: Has a networking between various hostels across India been possible?

There have been many such struggles happening in Universities across the country. For instance, the protests at MANUU wherein students burnt the hostel attendance sheets and rulebooks was one such powerful moment. Or the ongoing protests at National Law School in Bhopal, or the powerful 'Stand with Nomoly' protests that happened regarding rampant sexual harassment, or the protest at BHU. We have been able to connect with these movements and stand inspired by them. Often, the Facebook page has been useful for this reaching out, wherein people feel comfortable to reach out, often we have also been able to establish closer connections in those hostels and colleges for further engagements. We had been in touch with some people in BHU which also allowed us to get a better insight into the movement. However, there have also been times when there have been independent Pinjra Tod units that have been running in some colleges and we hear about it through the media. The movement has allowed for a wider understanding and recognition of the manifestations of similar issues across campuses, and the kind of negotiations that the movement/collective is part of in different colleges.

Q: How far has media turned their attention to the agitation?

Pinjra Tod operates in Delhi in what could be called the post December 2012 moment and therefore, media outlets have treated Pinjra Tod with much curiosity initially. Often, there would be media over-presence at any Pinjra Tod event, even a small one while a media blackout for an Occupy UGC protest or a Justice for Rohith Vemula protest the very next day, in which Pinjra Tod would be participating.

It is that the media reports have been favourable and have also aided in creating pressure on college authorities, often in case of show cause notices and witch hunting but it has also been interesting for us to note how the media reports. Often the media will choose to edit out our statements, choosing to use sexism instead of brahmanical patriarchy, choosing to title their stories in quotes. Often we have been asked questions about whether our parents know of our involvement in the movement and approve of it, often we have been addressed as “desh ki betiyaan azaadi maang rahi hain” to which we have objected. Often, we have been proposed and often sneakily packaged into a (individualist) movement such as “I can” and individual members been asked to pose in shorts in the college and send pictures, completely running against our demands that the movement is a collective effort of women students, and that it isn’t simply an individual act of rebellion. Often, the media also feels entitled to ask us to pose in certain ways, with certain select posters to up the sensational value. All these have been constant negotiations with the media that wishes to report on ‘gender’ in a certain manner. Which is not to dismiss that it has also been instrumental in pitching the movement in a certain way but it has been interesting to note how a post regarding dress codes in IIT Delhi will garner much interest and will be published widely, whereas the very next post/protest from the same Facebook page regarding a Dalit woman student committing suicide due to the police’s refusal to file her complaint of blackmail against her partner/boyfriend will be completely ignored by the same media outlets.

Q: What are the personal experiences of the participants? How did families, neighbours, male friends, boyfriends, teachers respond to this activism?

Experiences of individual members from family members/friends/partners have been varied. From encouraging, supporting to disapproving to even being made fun of. Often, some members have found themselves as having been characterised as over enthused, or as someone who reacts to things to sharply. Some friends have even joined the movement. Many a times, women have had to lie to their families to attend a Night march and as a movement, we have had to be careful about who will speak to the media and who will not, whose picture must not be shared with the media or on the Facebook page etc. Many such negotiations have informed our decisions in the movement; indeed some people cannot participate in the more visible protests or public meetings but are integral to the movements. In fact, in some colleges, Pinjra Tod has operated with guerrilla tactics such as putting up posters at 5 am, sliding parchas under hostel room doors late at night etc and sometimes even operated with a different name. Some activists have partners who are also part of the movement, and that has come with its own set of negotiations, during tough periods. Some have partners who aren’t and have had to deal with the stress that accompanies periods of hyperactivity and organising, and it definitely has a toll on intimate relationships and friendships, the partner finding it difficult to comprehend this level of political activity whereas some have been able to have more meaningful partnerships/intimacies because of the same. There have been cases of intimate partner violence that someone has shared with a few other activists, depending on the intimacy and the friendships that have been created through the movement. Cases of activists being stalked, say not just by ABVP but also classmates, perhaps, and the movement in these cases has been an important support structure not only in the fight against the administration but also in these negotiations that inform a University woman student’s experience in the city and the fights against the family. Of course, there will always more to do in these cases, and the struggle is ongoing for that as well.

This interview was conducted in 2018. Recently few Dalit-Bahujan members of Pinjra Tod issued a public statement while leaving Pinjra Tod, their statement can be found in the link given below.

http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9582&catid=129&Itemid=195

Engaging with this Debate, Pinjra Tod activists came up with a response which can be read here.

<https://pinjratod.wordpress.com/2019/03/20/women-on-the-edge-of-time-reflections-from-pinjra-tod/>

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The story of Unbelonging: Women in public space

Based on the Book “Why Loiter”¹

■ Madhurima Majumder

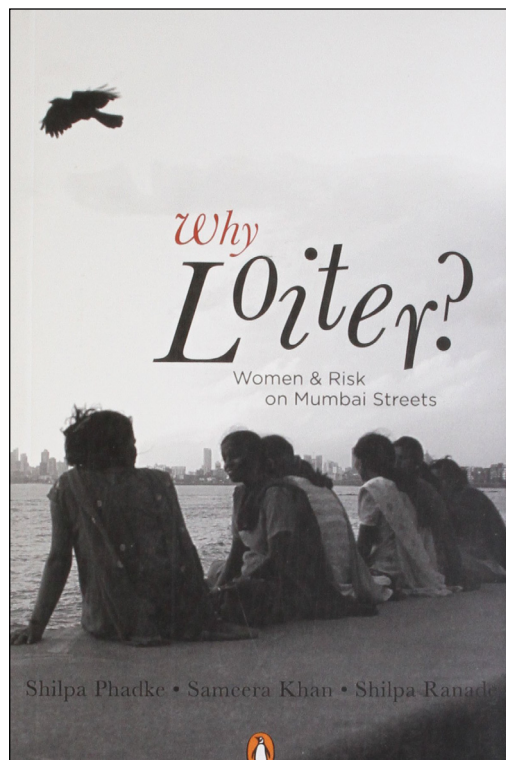
Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade in their book *Why Loiter: Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* place loitering and risk-taking as an important feminist concern in women’s access to public space. This book points out that women are only granted conditional access to the public space as long as they “demonstrate respectability and purpose”. Women don’t belong to public spaces and hence their access can be threatened any time. Women across class, caste, religion, none are exception to this rule. This article is a brief overview of this book and the movements around women in public space that followed.

Who do our cities belong to?

The agreed upon norm is that the rightful claim over the public spaces of our cities belong to men, whereas women are only allowed to use it temporarily to get about their lives. In fact, the right to have a public life as well as access to public space was not something that most women enjoyed even a century back. City and definition of citizenship, this book points out, were established by demarcating the “unbelongers” like women, migrants, landless, slaves, etc. Women were not seen as autonomous citizens and had to be under the guardianship of a man. In modern politically democratic states, women are granted equal citizenship. However, this remains true in theory.

One might argue that times are changing and more and more women are stepping in the public space, especially post liberalization. In fact we are doing a project on women who are staying on their own, outside the scope of

the familial guardians, on their own. However, with women coming to cities for education and employment, these spaces often function as proxy guardians. Thus, women still do not enjoy equal access. Transgression from the path of respectability or purpose can threaten their access to public space. And hence after every case of sexual violence, the first point of interest seems to be “what was she wearing”, “what was she doing there?” Women are still not autonomous individuals. Women and their



lives remain as needing to be closely guarded.

The modern state and the economy have created a historical situation where women are allowed limited access to public space, but in turn they have to follow and sometimes even become moderators of patriarchal code.

Code of conduct for Women

In fact, the supervisory gaze is so pervasive that women often internalize the values and self-censor. Women are discouraged from going out due to concerns for their own safety. Yet when there is choice between respectability and safety from violence, women are often forced to choose the former. This points to the fact that the real concern is to guard the ‘honour’ of the woman, immaterial of whether she has to face violence or not.

Ladies hostels have strict curfew timings in place for the “safety” of the women and yet often fail to have proper infrastructural measures that are more relevant in keeping them safe. There have been times when women have been turned away failing to reach hostel within curfew timing, which seems counterintuitive if the central concern was their safety! What this shows is that women have no right to take risks and those who do, are interpreted as “calling for trouble” and are disciplined.

In fact women do not have the permission to be comfortable with their presence in public space. There is a crippling burden of being on guard the moment they step out. Women feel the need to avert gazes, look purposeful and occupy as little space and look as inconspicuous as possible. This is often both a strategy to avoid groping hands and a reflection of women’s conditional access to public space. On the other hand the average man has a different level of entitlement to public space.

It would have so liberating if women didn’t have to treat every encounter with a stranger or a new place as a potential threat. Women cannot belong to the city, or its public space if they don’t feel comfortable and relaxed in public spaces. It would indeed be liberating for women to be at ease and actually enjoy the world outside. The book aptly points out how in public spaces women without any visible sign of purpose are unimaginable. A city where women are sitting or standing with nowhere to go, chatting whistling, laughing, breast-feeding, is a radically different city from the ones we live in. This desire to be

able to own public space was so identifiable that this book *Why Loiter* and the movement that followed from it resonated with women across not only in India, but women across South Asia. It is to this desire that the book (2011) directly speaks and places the right to loiter as not only legitimate but a central feminist demand around the issue of women's access to public space.

Loitering as a political act

In the debate on women and their access to public space, this book succeeds in moving beyond the limiting scope of debates around securitization. It rightfully shifts the focus from "protection" to a "rights" based discourse. After the infamous Delhi Rape Case of 2012, much of the focus has been on discussions around security measures for women in public spaces. However, many women's collective organized meetings and events that aimed at occupying public spaces that were outside the acceptable or norm for women. Hyderabad for Feminism organized a **Midnight March** on January 5, 2013. The march was organized to relook at the assumptions regarding safe and unsafe hours for women as well as to send a message to men that women are to be respected as fellow humans, even in the night. A collective in Pakistan, called '**Girls at Dhaba**' tried to occupy public spaces that were largely male dominated, such as roadside eateries. This collective of women were troubled by the disappearance of women from the public space and tried to reclaim a world where all genders have equal access. Many movements were in fact organized in several cities as a response to the publication of this book. The **Meet to Sleep** movement was started by Blank Noise, a feminist collective in Bangalore in 2015. Women took to their public parks and spent time loitering, sleeping or just simply hanging out. 500 women and girls, across 25 big and small cities like Bangalore, Mumbai, Dimapur, Kohima, Surat, Panjim, Jaipur, Vadodra, Jodhpur, Islamabad, Karachi, and Ranchi joined this movement. Another initiative started by this collective around the same time was **#walkalone**, which asked women to

be their own action heroes and take a walk alone in a part they never had before. The intention behind this movement was to collectively fight fear that women have long been taught to carry. These women through individual and collective action tried to create new experiences for themselves and those around them and through that build new narratives of belonging, connection, and pride in place of fear, shame and violation. **I Will Go Out** was a nationwide march carried on 21 January 2017 to demand women's right to fair and equitable access to public spaces. Women and men marched across 30 cities and towns as a response to the mass molestation of women that happened in the streets of Bangalore on during New Years Eve celebrations.


Resilience in the face of fear

In present times, with the rise of neo traditionalism the presence of the unbelongers of the city - women, Dalit, Muslims, migrants, couples have become even more precarious. The present shift in politics and public opinion indicate that the code of respectability and purpose are getting enforced more strictly and any transgression is discouraged more violently.

Why Loiter and the several movements that sprang up in big and small cities indicate that there is a growing problem and we can't wish it away. These movements, a cynic might argue do very little in terms of actually changing the larger structures. However, trying to understand and articulate our tenuous relation with public space might not alter the exclusionary structures that limit our relation with the public space, but it does change one thing. It doesn't stay invisible.

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Broadsheet on Contemporary Politics

Health care on the agenda

Crisis or opportunity?

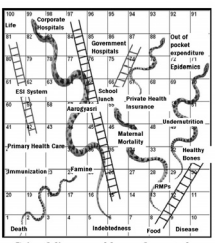
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Conducting/Curtailing Pleasure: Notes on leisure, conduct and urban sexuality

■ Pranoo Deshraj

The Day of Pleasure

It is Wednesday. Today is Ladies night in one of the most prominent pubs in the city, 10 Downing Street, located within Lifestyle Mall, Begumpet about 5 or 6 kilometres away from our university hostel. By evening, we have mobilized a set of women to come with us. "This is going to be fun, don't be such a prude". There are free drinks! (This was always hard to believe, until one of our more perceptive friends informs us that this is how they are able to lure more men into the club). We are dressed in outfits we wouldn't normally dare to wear on campuses, much less outside it. We are ready to go. As we begin to leave, we gather our shawls, dupattas, shrugs and jackets to "protect" our bodies from the ravaging but more than that, the suspecting and scandalized eyes of the public: the auto or cab that will take us there, the men/women we are likely to encounter on our way and even to some extent our peers on campus. After all this preparation, we step outside the gates of our campus and wait for an auto (this is ofcourse a narrative before the emergence of on-call cab services). As we wait a number of vehicles pass us by, staring, whistling, passing comments. Sometimes we try to shoo them away, more often than not, we meet their eyes with a steely gaze until they turn away, and sometimes tired of this incessant harassment we just shrug it off. Finally, we reach the club and even before we pass the bouncer at the entrance, our protective gear is off and we enter – made up, free and bursting with excitement.

(Narrative based on interviews 2013-14)

A Lesson in Conduct

I was with two friends... We just wanted to see the trains go by. To stand under the bridge and hear the sound of the trains crossing. That's all we wanted to do. That's it... I was in a party dress. We had this freshman's party and we were just taking a detour. They (the police) just came. "So you are taking advantage of this girl and you are prostituting for them". And I said we were just coming from a party at our institute. And they were like "your institute allows you to have parties at this hour". "It was a freshman's party other institutes have that too". But they don't want to understand the situation. They want to take the worst of it. Without any concrete proof how can you throw these accusations and be so mean and harsh about it? I mean try to get your facts together. Then they took us to the police station and harassed us, kept us there for three hours...just seated. They just kept on saying, one policeman after another. They would not shut up.

Like "how are you dressed?" It was not like I was.... I was wearing a knee length dress. I mean a dress that is up to my knees, it is not above my knees or something! It was not exposing anything, and I was wearing dark coloured stockings... I mean don't people wear dresses, shorts, sarees? I was completely covered. It was just my hands that were bare. Even then I was wearing a shrug. They just saw what they wanted to see.

Someone from college came and talked to them. He wrote a letter, said "I have all these

contacts". Called up lots of people. It was a lot of drama. They called the hostel office, checked our id cards. We had already shown them our ids. They were just not ready to believe anything. Then my friend came, two or three other people came and I think because of his contacts they were a little scared. It was really good that he was there. For the guys with me it was really funny. In the beginning it was scary but later they laughed it off. For them it was funny that I was accused of being a minor and one of them a pimp, while the other, a client. For me, it was like total disbelief... What the hell are you thinking? Can't you see our faces? Don't children from universities exist in this universe? Can only prostitutes and pimps exist?

(Excerpt from interviews conducted between 2013-14)

There have been concentrated state efforts towards making urban centres into educational, professional hubs. This process, alongside the struggle for education and autonomy from within various social movements has aided increased migration of minorities, particularly women, to city spaces for jobs and education, in search of freedom and social mobility. Often, their gendered engagement with and visibility in urban public spaces is overshadowed by concerns for protection (Fester: 2005). The production and performance of the sexualized body in the city both reconstitutes female embodiment, and genders the city topography. This process delineates places of belonging and non-belonging through which female conduct is governed. For women who visit pubs, this experience of urban life is marked by the chaos and threat of the city on one hand, and the freedom and pleasure of the pub on the other. Urban sexuality for these women is constituted through this dialectic of the exclusive space of middle class leisure that is the pub, and the 'public' space of the city.

'Pub-going women' is a term that has gained some popularity in recent years as financial autonomy and liberalization have enabled the entry of middle class women into the leisure economy. The pub is often constructed

as a liminal space, even as it is saturated in the pleasure economy of liberal capitalist enterprise, often functioning as a modern day ritualistic space for heterosociality. Liminality could be understood as a threshold that straddles both norm and margin—offering perspectives or modes of being not available in everyday life¹—in this case, to dance, drink, or dress provocatively, performing in ways that question and challenge the construct of femininity in public spaces where the demand is often to be ‘demure and modest’. In order to understand female embodiment and leisure in urban public spaces, I have juxtaposed the normalized liminality of the pub in contrast with the expectations of public life in the city, where women often encounter harassment, or even assault for their attire and conduct.

“I don’t feel restricted in pubs I feel free to wear what I like and not worry whether people will look”

“Only in clubs, campuses, malls I see but otherwise I don’t see women wear what they like and be comfortable.”

“We tend to go in groups. Two people may not, one definitely won’t. *The more, the merrier but it is actually the more, the more safe you feel.* When you are standing on the road waiting for the cab to come even those moments are really nervous. All the people walking by just spy on you. *you are all dressed, you will go and trash the place, you are like skanks.*”

(Excerpts from interviews conducted between 2013-14)

Clubs or disco-pubs are sustained by a permissiveness that is prohibited by the normalizing forces of urban public space. Urban city life is marked by separations;

belonging and non-belonging are constantly mediated by these walls. Clubs grant an illusion, a polarization with the norms of the city that allows for the existence of pleasure ensconced in legitimized social structures. They are architectural enclosures of permitted transgression, one whose illusory liminality



allows for the sustenance of the norm outside its spatial boundaries, a subversion that reiterates even more firmly the structure it purportedly subverts. Ladies Night, a themed night that provides alcohol free of charge to women, reiterates the masculinist performance of these spaces. Not only are

free drinks a way to attract the ‘paying’ male crowd, perceived by these clubs as financially capable individuals, the very idea that women are provided free drinks anthropomorphically reiterates the club as ‘gentleman-provider’. Surveillance here is made explicit, not only through bartenders that often limit the consumption of alcohol per women for safety concerns, but also the presence of cameras and bouncers (male personnel employed to ‘regulate’ club revelry).

The female body in the metropolis, on the other hand, is governed by self-surveillance. The entry of single women into the metropolis, either from smaller towns, or other metropolitan spaces, allows for sexual reconstitution with respect to the spatial difference of cities. Not only do women reorient their behaviour to the city, they sculpt the topography of the city into a cartographical construct of their experiences, often rooted in community affiliations and linked to perceptions of biological/social vulnerability. These are further shaped by the structural bias against singlehood that defines their experience of the city and increased vulnerability to violence in city-spaces. These techniques of self-surveillance as protection are sustained by the repressive albatross of punishment that coaxes an embodied performance of femininity in urban spaces.

As Foucault has pointed out, surveillance, that had a direct, menacing presence prior to what

could be safely termed as ‘modernity’ has undergone a semantic, even ontological shift from the beginning of 18th century Europe with the transformation of power as discursive, embodied knowledge (Foucault, 1975). This shift entails that mechanisms of control are often internalized, as Foucault

¹The term was proposed by Arnold Van Gennep and later taken up by performance studies, particularly Victor Turner to describe theatre space. Van Gennep used it to distinguish the transition period between ‘reality’ and trance states in tribal rituals. Contemporary usage of the term broadens its possibilities by exploring various states that pass from the fabric of everydayness into novelty and non-ordinariness that are also located in the everyday, though exceed it. The argument remains whether institutionalized and legitimized experiences such as that of the nightclub would be considered liminal- even though its habitus is quite unlike that of everyday life.

writes using the architectural metaphor of the Panopticon:

the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers (Foucault, 1975)

The internalized gaze embedded within the social contract, a silently yet ubiquitous social agreement bound by values of the self/other. The idea of self-surveillance is central to the functioning of modern society; orienting, constituting and engineering ideal subjectivity. In the Foucauldian premise power in modern societies "...reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (Foucault 1980,30). Our bodies are discursively constituted through internalized forms of control. The city, with its myriad spatial differences, legitimized and sub-cultural spaces of leisure and the anonymity of subjects to one another, holds out new and unimagined potential for transgression and for subjective reconstitution for single women, yet these are constrained by the spatial organization of urban life and subjectivity. Transgression of the city's spatial organization contaminates and threatens patriarchal boundaries of conduct. It grants community the agency to employ corrective mechanisms, either morphed in subtle ways by the family, or in the case of single women, friendly neighbourhood aunt/uncle, strangers, police sometimes culminating in explicit physical, sexual or psychological violence and violation.

To understand this better, we return to the narratives in the beginning of the text. The two narratives contrast and contradict each other, but they are very much two sides of the same coin, to use a clichéd expression. If in the first narrative, navigation of city-space before entrance into the club highlights inventive techniques of self-protection:

travelling in groups, covering one's body with shrugs, jackets or dupattas, techniques embedded in the perceptive reorganization of conduct in city-spaces. The second narrative opens the register of 'masculinist ownership' within the metropolis, the non-belonging of the female body in city-space, where regulation of her conduct is defined by time/place, clothing and company. The experience of women in clubs is a counter to such incidents where we are expected to "be stylish", "look fashionable". If clothing legitimizes the body, marking its intelligibility in and compatibility to the conduct of spaces, thus delineating the body's place in the social structure, our experiences between the regulation of public space and the equally sexist, yet contradictory demands of club spaces means that urban femininity is performed through an unstable yet socially recognizable code of sexuality in urban space. The reversal between the space of the club and the city often means that for women who visit this space, the enactment of femininity in urban spaces is marked by navigating respectability in the city and the need to 'dress up' in the club, indicating the two extremes of performative possibilities for women in and as urban publics. Her conduct in public and demeanour in pubs are both subject to social scrutiny.

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**Sexuality and Harassment:
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Owning the City: Belonging and Anonymity

■ Madhumeeta Sinha



Several Indian cities, jockeying for investment and viability on a 'global' map, are desperately being modernized—but what does this process make of their inhabitants? There is constant talk of infrastructure: newer roads, hospitals, educational institutions, shopping malls, high-rise apartments, theatres, and theme parks are said to be pushing urban boundaries high and wide, and perhaps creating job opportunities for some of the aspirants pouring into the cities. The city's inhabitants, old and new, are caught in their everyday struggles to survive and settle in the city. One presumably acquires the right to a city by living in it, observing its rules and codes, using its infrastructure, contributing to its growth, feeling at home in it. In this sense cities are supposed to be open to all inhabitants, but then reality bites! The relationship between the city and its inhabitants is based on, and negotiated through, older and newer modalities of power. I will focus here on the gender dimensions of urban existence in India—how the city propels certain relationships and behavior models, which in turn encode gendered norms of belonging to the city—through a reading of Sameera Jain's compelling documentary film *Mera Apna Sheher* (2011).

Mera Apna Shehar is a revealing exploration of the mundane (everyday, or routine, 'worldly' existence) of young women in a city, Delhi in this case. Many documentaries have archived the stories of the survival of the poor in the most adversarial urban contexts: *Bombay Hamara Sheher*, *Jari Mari*, etc. *Mera Apna Sheher* looks at the city from a gendered perspective, representing not just the aspect of exploitation and survival but the desire of the female protagonists to belong to the city, and to make it their 'own.' There is a clue to this in the double possessives in the title: *mera* (my), *apna* (own). Unlike Patwardhan's rallying cry of *humara* (our), the sense of 'owning' invoked in Jain's film is decidedly more personal yet the peculiar genitive claim makes sense only when infused with a strong sense of a gendered collective. There are three parallel tracks in the film which depict the city from three different perspectives: the first is that of the Woman in the City and her use of different city scapes, with which the film begins; the second track portrays three female drivers traveling the urban roads and their accounts about their relationship to the city; the third track is of a stationary camera observing the city from a window in a middle class neighbourhood, depicting the same street at different times as quiet and raucous, uneventful and hostile.

The sense of the personal invoked in the film is diffused, unrooted—yet also grounded in a feminist history and politics. Through its interested observation of the lives of lower class working women, *Mera Apna Sheher* documents the experience of the Woman in the City whose sense of freedom is located in the fraught intersection of anonymity and misrecognition. This reading is exemplified through one statement made in the film: Suneeta, one of the drivers, comments that she finds it easier to drive elsewhere in the city than in her own *basti* or locality, where everyone is watching her. Anonymity and belonging paradoxically come together through the negotiation of alienated space.

The women's movement in India from the 1970s onwards has created opportunities for women to claim the city for various purposes: education, employment, healthcare, etc., on an everyday basis. This has transformed the urban spaces in more than one way. Women as domestic help, municipal workers, security guards, teachers, nurses, receptionists, doctors, housewives etc. are using the urban public spaces for various purposes. As Sameera Jain puts it: "We all know and understand the gendering of spaces or that space is gendered; I felt I wanted my own idea, my own voice..." When she uses her own voice, she turns the relationship

between space and gaze on its head. *Mera Apna Sheher* is an experimental documentary where the story of a great metropolis does not come through its history, its heroes, but through the tenuous gendered relationships that organize the possibilities and limitations of everyday existence in the city.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau deploys the categories of “use” and “belonging” to draw our attention to “the notion of belonging as a sentiment, which is built up and grows out of everyday activity.” For instance, regular walks (and other such uses of urban spaces) are a part of everyday existence which also construct a personal sense of attachment. For a woman the negotiation with the urban spaces happens through her gendered identity within relations of patriarchal power. The concept of belonging is usefully explored by Jain through the *Woman in the City*, her collective character in *Mera Apna Sheher*. Our first encounter with this character occurs in the opening moments of the film when we see a solitary woman sitting calmly at a bus stop who suddenly starts making some gestures towards the camera, maybe to grab our attention. The scene moves to a corner tea stall bustling with customers, serving of tea, selling of cigarettes and movements of people with faint sounds of cricket commentary in the background. In a passing shot we also get a glimpse of a woman sitting close to the wall behind the tea shop, maybe cleaning cups, or part of some chore related to the shop. After establishing this slice of everyday what comes into focus is a woman who goes past the tea stall a couple of times, stand in the corner and then buys a *chai*, and later goes and asks for *meethi supari* (sweet beetle nut) and then again just hangs around there. Her presence makes the audience uncomfortable and jarring for us and for all the characters within the frame. We constantly ask: Who is she and why is she there? The male reactions within the frame are of meaningful smiles and jeers, all of an understanding of who the woman could be or how her presence calls for their reactions. The gendered nature of city space becomes apparent through these encounters.

Later the *Woman in the City* is there in a park leisurely sitting, also lying down, scratching her thighs, and gazing around. She attracts a lot of attention for being alone, and for being so relaxed with herself. Men look at her, go

past her again and again or sit across her laughing at her, imitating her gestures. The total lack of purpose in what she is doing is bewildering for everyone, and so is her unruffled ease, even with the looks. On another occasion, the *Woman* is standing near an arterial road in no hurry to cross it and as it should happen, a bike with two riders moves in dangerously close to her and then goes ahead. Immediately after that a car stops in front of her and waits for her attention. In absence of a response from her it starts reversing to come closer and pursue its chase as the woman first does not react to it and then getting its intention starts walking away from it. These incidents take us back to De Certeau’s term ‘belonging’ that I had invoked earlier. As the scenes from the film indicate the sentiment created here is of fear, discomfort and alarm. City here changes from a mere geographical setting to a space providing norms for gendered behavior. It begins telling women that their presence in certain spaces will have repercussions. Tovi Fenster’s observation rings true: “belonging and attachment are built here on the base of accumulated knowledge, memory, and intimate corporal experiences of everyday walking. A sense of belonging changes with time as these everyday experiences grow and their effects accumulate.”

The second track is that of two women in a moving car, one driving and the other in the passenger’s seat, talking about their driving job and how this role plays out in the city. In the first shots of this parallel narrative there are two women in a car—one is driving and the other one is the co-passenger. It soon becomes clear that both are professional drivers who have chosen this career after being trained by Azad Foundation. In another shot, there are three women standing in the parking area away from other male drivers aware that they are being observed and being talked about but are undeterred by this fact. The two women going around in the car talk of the joy of driving but also express their anxieties and fears being stared at the crossroads, of men speeding along their car, the difficulties of getting wet and of using toilets. In a curious toilet scene where the women walk for a while to reach a public toilet meant for women, the dark corridor and the bad maintenance are used as indicators of the indifference with which the city treats its women.

The third track is in the observational mode where the camera from the window of a house captures a by-lane—where men casually cross the road and pee against a tree; across the road is a walled play ground where we can see young boys play; there are occasional scuffles on the road between drivers; pedestrian walk; a mélange of various activities are represented in this trail. But this unhappening road of the city changes when the *Woman in the City* decides to lazily sit on the pavement—relaxed, leisurely, again makes a claim on the city. Through the episodes of women at work-driving around the city, woman in leisure-being in the city, the concepts of use and belonging are being brought together. “Use” as everyday corporeal expression of conducting one’s life and fulfilling various chores is represented through the roles of the female drivers—while learning driving in the ground, while taking orders from the bosses or while talking about various experiences of driving. These examples of use come alongside taking a walk around India Gate or having a candid chat with another driver friend while moving across the city in the car. These scenes depict how urban spaces have a bearing on various dimensions of gender relation.

The experimental quality of this film comes from its seemingly unstructured plot, use of a hidden camera along with the ordinary ones, shaky and hazy images and also from the unhurried way with which it shares an experiential moment. The pen camera placed in the bag of the *Woman in the City* records the reactions of various men—amusement, unease, curiosity—clearly marking this figure as out of ordinary. As the *Woman in the City*, Komita Dhanda enacts the part of a loitering figure. She is not the female counterpart of Baudelaire’s flaneur, the flaneuse rather a pedestrian who is body negotiating the borders of her limits. So, the public spaces which get privatized by rampant masculinity and acquire symbolic meaning of fear and insecurity are being disrupted by the *Woman in the City* who refuses to take the responsibility of inviting aggression and violence by turning her gaze to the city and pushing the borders of restrictions and control.

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My tryst with local transport in villages, towns and cities

■ Mithun Som

One of the important dimensions of being in a city is the ability to navigate it. For me a friendly city is one which has good public transport, which allows me to be mobile and be on my own. Cities, towns and villages in India has their own unique system of public transport. Having lived alone in different villages, towns and cities, navigating them through public transport became an integral part of my living and cherishing that place, and in this piece I bring forward that dimension.

I grew up in a small mining township in Chhattisgarh. Here one's own vehicle, be it a cycle, a two wheeler or a four wheeler (only an Ambassador or Fiat at that time) were the major forms of transport. We had cycle rickshaws as the only form of public transport, which were available in bus stand, or some specific place like a hospital. Whether for everyday use or for emergencies, one had to go and call them.

In those years, trains for me were always meant for long distance travel and I looked forward to our yearly or bi-yearly trips to grandfather's place as much for the train travel as for the trip itself. Train travel also meant an opportunity to buy a comic book or magazine in the Wheeler store and fighting for the window seat. I cherished the illusion of self moving after the long journey. From this beginning to my total reliance today on public transport (mostly trains) for my daily commuting has been quite a journey.

My first experience of staying in a city was at Jabalpur where I went for my graduation.

Here I relied on cycle rickshaws on the rare occasion we got to get out of our jail-like hostel. My hostel did not allow girls to step out of the campus anytime without a guardian and people like me who did not have a local guardian had almost no interaction with the city except for the few times when we were able to sneak out.

So when I landed up in Mumbai for my Masters, and had the first real interaction with a big city, I found it exhilarating. Mumbai has multiple modes of transport, the bus, the train and also autos and taxis. Little did I know then that public transport in Mumbai was quite famed and had no parallel in the other cities of the country. I started travelling alone right from the first month and it was an adventure. I remember when I stood waiting for my bus number 505 in the bus stop, I first saw a 502 and I thought (rather innocently presuming they come in serial order) there will be another two buses before my bus comes, and I was quite surprised to see a 352 instead! The second lesson learned was when a seat got empty just behind me in the bus and I didn't even realise it. An elderly gentleman called me, pointed the seat out and asked me later if I was new to Bombay. I said I was and he asked me, "How will you manage here?" During the two years of my stay I learnt to keep a hawk eye on every seat and to notice minor changes in posture of the seated traveller and especially if she fidgets with her handbag (you need to be ready to grab the seat when she gets up). Of course, not used to the pollution, I had a difficult time coping with it and I developed

bronchitis too. But, I could travel alone at 12.30 at night in the bus. I loved the local trains and as most outsiders who have got into the train will tell you how the first time, they didn't know how, and they missed a train because of the crowds in rush hour. I missed mine too in Dadar station. But as I realised later, it didn't matter much as the frequency of the trains were very good. There were days where I just felt like being alone and I took the train, right down to Churchgate, went to Marine Drive, stared at the sea and took a train back to my institute. I loved this feeling of independence, not needing to depend on anyone for going out unlike in my hometown or Jabalpur. It was here that I discovered "night life", that one can go out in the streets at night as well. Once four of us (girls) went for a late-night movie at Metro, missed our last train, spent the night having tea and loitering on Marine Drive and took the first train back from Churchgate. Our classes and assignments would keep us busy during the day and the only movie shows we could catch up with were the late-night shows. Travelling late at night was never a problem.

I understood the niceness of the Mumbai transport system when I went to Delhi to study further. Delhi had buses and autos and the metro was still to come. I had to be mentally prepared to haggle with the auto drivers for the price and wait for some time before I could get an auto. This was in stark contrast to the Bombay autos in which I would just get in and only after that would tell him (always him) my destination. I had friends who would let go of autos in Bombay as they did not have a good stereo system (spoiled for choice!). I learnt in Delhi that autos don't run by meter. I learnt that even though I could loiter around inside the university late in the night or early in the morning, it is not easy to step out of the campus late at night alone. We had to cajole or threaten the bus drivers to drop us atleast at the university gate when we came back after nine from the theatre festival in Mandi House. At times we won and at times the bus driver wouldn't listen to us and would instead drop us four stops away before his official stopping point inside the university campus. Things have drastically changed for Delhi after the coming of the metro.



Back in my home town, we still rely on private vehicles. When I was doing my field work for my Ph.D. and had to travel to another district regularly, I had to depend on my father for the last mile transport. Come summer, winter or rains, I had to ask my father to drop me off at and pick me up from the bus stop which was a good three km from my house. There was no provision to park my personal vehicle at the station. For the last mile travel to the villages on my field work, I would walk, ride pillion on two wheelers and even cycles belonging to strangers. One of my research clusters had a cycle shop which gave cycles for hire and I could hire a cycle for the whole day and go to whichever village I wanted to, feel the freedom! Of course, there was only one ladies cycle and at least 10 gents cycles and I used to pray that no one has rented it before I reached.

Before Delhi I had also spent two years in a small block in Jharkhand. The whole market area, government offices, bus stand could be easily covered on foot. Buses were there to district headquarters or other towns. People sitting on top of the bus was a common scene. And during the wedding season, when many of these buses were hired for private marriages leaving only a few buses to ply for the public, it was only the women, small kids and very old men who could enter the bus, all the rest would be asked to go on roof of the

bus. My male colleagues preferred using their own vehicle as much as they could, especially during this time. My work involved travelling to villages and instead of depending on the office vehicle (which was a prerogative reserved for women colleagues), I got my own two-wheeler and loved the mobility and independence that came with it, to be able to travel through the fields and rivulets with water knee deep. This was also the first time I learnt to ride a bike. But to go back home or to other places, I had to rely on the last bus which reached the station at around seven in the evening and I had to kill at least five hours in the railway station. Similarly, I had to wait till morning in the station when I came back as my train reached by 2.30 am. No wonder, when I left that place and went back again after six months, the fellow selling *chivda* on the platform and the waiter in the food stall commented that they had not seen me for a long time! Single women travelling late at night are easily recognised and that too in a remote place in Jharkhand. This was also a place where most men won't allow their sister or wife to ride pillion. A young woman on a bike is rare. And here I was riding pillion on any of my ten male colleagues on any given day and at times they would also sit pillion on my bike!! Yet, this was also a place where Santhali man and woman would hold hands and walk to the market.

In my last year in Delhi, as I shifted from student life to working life, I got used to the sponsored luxury of cabs and flights. I now found it convenient to travel by autos rather than buses for my personal travels. This continued as I shifted to Hyderabad. I got dependent on my husband as we travelled in the city in car. Since his relatives were present in every nook and corner of the city, we travelled across Hyderabad and I became the navigator with google maps. The advent of technology helped me immensely and yet I never got the whole picture of the city, or rather I never tried. I only knew the routes to only the most frequented relatives' homes. It was when I started working and started travelling by myself in public transport, that I started understanding the city much better (in my first few months of work and two years of being in Hyderabad, someone in office commented, "Why do you always say you don't know before you even hear about the place?"). Hyderabad had the advantage of MMTS trains, buses, autos and shared autos. Travelling in buses taught me many things, one was fitness—as one has to sprint to the middle of the road to catch the bus or even to get down in the middle of the road and sprint back avoiding speeding two wheelers. It taught me to have a sharp eye especially in stops like Lakdikapul where lots of buses come and one has to be very watchful for the bus number. I also learnt to balance myself (better than how air hostesses are taught!) as the bus twists and turns and suddenly brakes. The introduction of cabs like Uber and Ola has made my life much easier as long as my pocket is full. But the MMTS local have been my preference as the station is a walking distance from my home. Unlike earlier, when I started working and was totally dependent on the MMTS, I realised that one has to wait for half an hour to one hour or at rare occasions even more, as the cancellation and delay of trains are a regular feature, especially in the evenings. Once when I asked the counter clerk why the train was late by about 40 minutes, he said, "Everyday there is a new reason, sometimes the signal is red, sometimes some work is going on—people have also got accustomed to it". As I travel everyday, I have also met other daily passengers and I get to see the camaraderie of the regular passengers. I have also met some amazing women as they share their food,

stories and concerns. One of the major points of discussion in the trains last year was the metro which had not yet started. People evaluated whether it would help in making their travel easier. As the metro started functioning smoothly, many tried out different combinations and some have shifted to this new mode, some have retained back their old MMTS journeys, some are still waiting for new routes to be functional. With more lines opening up in the metro and decrease in fares, there will be a huge change in the way people travel in the city.

As I think back, I realise how women chart out their means of transport based on the availability, affordability and sense of security. Of course, my experiences are through the eyes of a middle class, upper caste, able bodied woman. And yet we see how the public transport influence the way we function, the almost unconscious way we weave our lives around it, for work, leisure or access to the public spaces. Jabalpur hostel never allowed me to venture out without a chaperone and I never knew or understood the city. I am nostalgic about my college and hostel but am indifferent to Jabalpur. Delhi gave access to me inside my huge university campus, and conditional access to the city. I was always alert, always careful and mindful of the time of the day outside the university gate. By late evening, I had to rush back to the safety of my campus. Mumbai on the other hand gave me the space, a good public transport and access to its public spaces and I relished it and still long for that city.

I could appreciate the public transport of the big city, especially the last mile transport as I compare it to my experiences in small towns and villages, where I had to be often dependent on someone. Being in Jharkhand in the small block of Poraiyahat, I realised that I am not the norm. Women in the villages recognised me from anywhere because of my bike. They had a lot of curiosity and questioned about me riding a bike and would often try out my helmet and ask for a ride. For them and the large majority like them, travelling to their mother's place is the only travel they did or the occasional travel to the block or nearest town to a hospital, or to government offices.

Hyderabad allows me space and time, I do not need to rush back home at a certain hour, I do find transport even quite late. For the first time, being a very regular user of public transport has given me a cosy familiarity at least on my everyday route, and brought in a sense of belonging to and ownership of the city.

The ability to be able to navigate the city and be mobile at all hours gives confidence not just for one's place but to navigate new places too. It then allows more women on the road and in turn becomes friendlier for them. Being a migrant woman for most part of my life, I am often asked, 'how do you like the city/place'? My answer often is, as much as it allows me to be mobile and independent.



Dilli Nazm

■ Nabina Das

*The rust of your migrant shame
Dirt under my grown nails
I clip off those each sorry moons*

*Overpasses are our shades of clouds
nimbus incantations of new love
our rendezvous that Dilli Haat chants*

*Oh take off the tired ghongroos
Chunari chunari the brass-bells scream
Sweat drops on your toes dense and limp*

*The scatter of broken nightly bangles
Each a mirror our breath can watch
The beat cop takes the hours home*

*The paan taint of your sad old lips
Gulkand songs of Charkhi-Dadri lore
I won't go there to see the waterless well*

*My mehboob, you be the summer tang
I your salt of the fickle streets of desire*

*lip to lip, we dance on love's continent
Your goatskin drum looks east
The forgotten lullaby wakes with
dreams
where Mehrauli 's naked goddess
sleeps*

*Your teacups are my stale eyes
They read my fortune stirred in rancid
milk
An arm of silk, the other – raw tender
skin*

*Rasiya Dilli melts in a red gulali sun
The streets a tired camel back
My mehboob, so meet me elsewhere
love!*

*** The above poem was written as a response to CITY AS STUDIO fellowship from Sarai-CSDS, Delhi
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Rachana Mudraboyina: Hyderabad Transactivist

An Introduction

■ Compiled by Madhurima Majumder

Most of the articles in this issue set out to explore the ways in which intersection of categories like gender, sexual orientation, class, caste and religion have a bearing on the privileges we enjoy and the vulnerabilities that we face. Gender has been placed as an important category that determines our relation with the city. Women find themselves at a disadvantaged position in comparison to men. However, those who do not fall into the neat binary of male and female sex that is assigned at birth find themselves at an enormously disadvantaged position. In India, transgender people have been historically discriminated against, so much so that the only modes of occupation available to them are begging and sex work. Transwomen and transmen and non-binary transgender people face violence and marginalization at every level. Government refuses to accept or even recognize their self-determined sexual and gender identities, public policies do almost nothing to include them, the media often ridicules or demonizes them and the medical world pathologizes them.

Out of these tremendous constraints, Rachana Mudraboyina, a transwoman from Rajahmundry migrated to Hyderabad and made it her new home. She has a double Masters, one in commerce and other in social work. She is an activist but interestingly her activism is not limited to the transgender people's rights and queer movements. Or even feminist movements. Besides working on these issues, she also actively engages with people's movements of other marginalized communities such as Dalits, workers, farmers and so on. Rachana's activism comes from a deeper understanding and conviction that transgender people do not come with their gender identity alone and have other marginalized identities of caste, religion, region etc. Her work over the years has been geared toward forging solidarity among these different voices from the margins to strengthen each other's struggle.

A brief look at her Facebook profile tells us that she uses this social media platform actively for expressing her thoughts, opinions

as well as build networks and strengthen her community based activism. For this article I have curated some of her Facebook posts in an attempt to plot these intersections and better understand her as an activist as well as an individual living and working in Hyderabad.

For this article, due to constraints of space, I have chosen some posts and have tried to maintain chronology.

9th Oct

Radhika Amma, Rohith Vemula's mother withdraws support from Amnesty India in light of the management's discrimination against its marginalized staff and use of the marginalized communities for meeting their membership targets. She stands with those discriminated against.

Jai Bheem... Johar Rohit... Very proud of my mother, Radhikaamma!

#Takeninjusticepersonally

Rohith Vemula was a Dalit scholar from HCU who took his own life as a mark of protest against the administration of University of Hyderabad, which refused to follow the due process and meted out punitive measure against six Dalit students on the basis of a complaint from the student from a dominant community.

15th oct

We all know that the sex workers' movement of this nation is on the verge of ethical slaughter by the sanskaari winds blown from fascist squall....

How far the #Metoo movement is going to take into its' folds the voice of women who are dehumanized by the patriarchal society on the basis of their different sexuality is to be seen. Choosing sex work as work and being gender variant is still taboo....

Proud to stand with this bold woman named Nalini Jameela whose first book The Autobiography of a Sex Worker was one of my favorite classics. It is a

fierce presentation of violent patriarchal oppressions of a sex worker, in the domestic sphere as well as the public places. This year she won the South Asia Laadli Award on gender sensitivity for her second book Romantic Encounters of a Sex Worker.

Nalini Jameela defines sex work as a language without any script or rule. She also says there is no doubt that choices and compulsions differ according to our social station but sex work was comparatively a better option than alternatives like labouring in a quarry, or being a petty vendor, domestic worker, etc.

Salaam Nalini Jameela for speaking from your heart! Thank you Population First for being diverse in your approach!

Gardeishewaqt ka kitna bada ehsaan hai aj...Ye zamin chand se behtar nazar atee hai humein...!

(I am so grateful to the bad times that I find myself in, it has made me more attentive to the life on ground than that on the lofty moon.)

15th Oct

AaaEee Anjali wins Ladli award.

The Laadli Media Awards honor, recognize and celebrate the efforts of those in media and advertising who highlight pressing gender concerns. It was organized by Population First, a communication and advocacy initiative along with United Nations Population Fund. This year, along with few others, Nalini Jameela and AaaEee Anjali team won the award. AaaEee Anjali is a show on Transvision, a youtube channel. This youtube channel was started by Rachana and others as a platform to dispelling myths that many cis people have about around the transgender community.

10th Oct

Arrest Venkat

Venkat is a rowdy sheeter. He has on several occasions harassed, abused and even allegedly murdered Prabalika, a transwoman from Hyderabad. Even though there are several charges against this man, the police department has not taken serious steps to stop him as most of the complainants were transwomen.

3rd Oct

#Metoo India

Tans sex workers and survivors of Venkats sexual harassment stand by Tanushree Dutta

16th Oct

Feeling alone

Hello #metoo movement, could you please tell me when will u say #transtoo

18th Oct

Feeling pained

#Metoo #transtoo

History owes us an apology for centuries of sexual harassment, rape and perpetual ostracism from justice.

19th Oct

Feeling heartbroken

Are transgender people's gang rapes, acid attacks, murders not gruesome crimes committed with highest viciousness?

25th oct

Feeling angry

It is the same Bramhinal patriarchy that legitimizes the sexual harassment of women and trans people. All the way!

Rachana extends her support to the women who spoke out against their harassers in the #Metoo movement, however at the same time she is skeptical about how relevant this movement is going to be for transgender women. In the above post one can see the complex set of emotions that a movement like #Metoo, triggers in Rachana. She understands the relevance and the urgency in the accounts of the largely privileged women but at the same time feel left out of the scope of the movement.

27th oct

Feeling pained

Azeem mere la...

8 yrs old Madrasa student beaten to death by Hindutva goons in Begumpur area of Malvia Nagar, Delhi

She laments the meaninglessness of ideals of toxic masculinity that led to the killing of a young boy in the hands of other young boys in Delhi. The incident refers to a fight that broke out among two groups of boys over the use of a vacant plot of land for playing cricket. Bystanders did nothing to stop the

fight and in fact encouraged and cheered one group while making fun of the others clothing and skull caps.

3rd Nov

Historical moment for Telangana Women and Trans Movements.

Women and Transgender peoples' Joint Action Committee released their Inclusive Manifesto for the coming elections. In the manifestos it includes issues of Dalit Women, Adivasi women, Muslim women, women farmers, women from unorganized sector, women in handloom, women in journalism, migrant women in house construction, women in domestic work, women who gone abroad for work, single women, women with disabilities, women with no shelter, girls from minority communities, transgender women and children with no parents, and so on. All put forth their demands regarding Political Representation, Education, Public Health, Against Violence, Safety and Security, Control of Liquor, Agriculture, Environment and Natural resources and Inter-Caste Marriages special Act.

A big thanks to all the Women Comrades from the Telangana Transgender Community that you all stood with us and made this historical moment possible.

A group of 30 associations working on women and transgender issues, along with several academicians and activist formed a Joint Action Committee. This committee held consultations and arrived at a manifesto of Women and Transgender people for the Telangana Legislative Assembly elections that were held on 7th Dec, 2018.

17th Nov

Shares a link - Sampoorna calls for community participation in Transgender Day of Remembrance

Sampoorna is a group for Trans and intersex Indians. Transgender Day of Remembrance is observed on 20th November to honour the memory of those who died due to systemic and structural transphobic violence. It started in 1999 as a web based project to memorialize the gruesome murder of Rita Hester in Massachusetts.

19th nov

In the words of Margaret Atwood, "We (society) still think of a powerful man as a born leader and a powerful woman as an anomaly"...

And here is a powerful Transwoman leader ChandramukhiMuvvala, now contesting as a Member of legislative Assembly, from Goshamahal Constituency , Hyderabad Telangana, India on behalf of Bahujan Left Front. She is just not only challenging the stereotypical leadership roles but also challenging the vote bank politics, demanding Transgender people's rights that remain untouched till today...!

Bravo...! Jai Bheem ...! Jai Saavithri...! –

22nd Nov

With our Bahujan party leader Chandramukhi, Don't forget our symbol... cast your own vote to Farmer with plough symbol.

Jai Bheem...Jai Savitribai...!

Chandramukhi is a transwoman activist. She contested in Telangana Legislative Assembly elections that were held on 7th Dec, 2018 election from Goshamahal constituency as a representative of Bahujan Left Front, Telangana.

22nd Nov

Feeling hopeful

More power to Sujatha Surepally contesting the elections as a part of BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party).

She also shows her support for Bahujan Samaj Party candidate, Dr. Sujatha Surepally, a Dalit academician and activist from Karimnagar.

22nd Nov

So the latest update on Adhaar uid.gov have no option for transgender.

This was a post about two transwoman who went to get their Adhaar Cards, but to their utter surprise found out that the form no longer has (T) Transgender as an option, unlike before.

22nd Nov

Feeling peaceful

Watch carefully the magic that occurs by giving a person enough time and comfort to be themselves.

-To kill a Mockingbird

Rachana share a quote from *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, a novel by Harper Lee that explores racism of 1930's United States. Interestingly, though her posts are more often than not

political, she often borrows arguments and rhetoric used in literature to arrive at that.

30th Nov

Feeling strong

Injuries make movements wise and strong

1st Dec

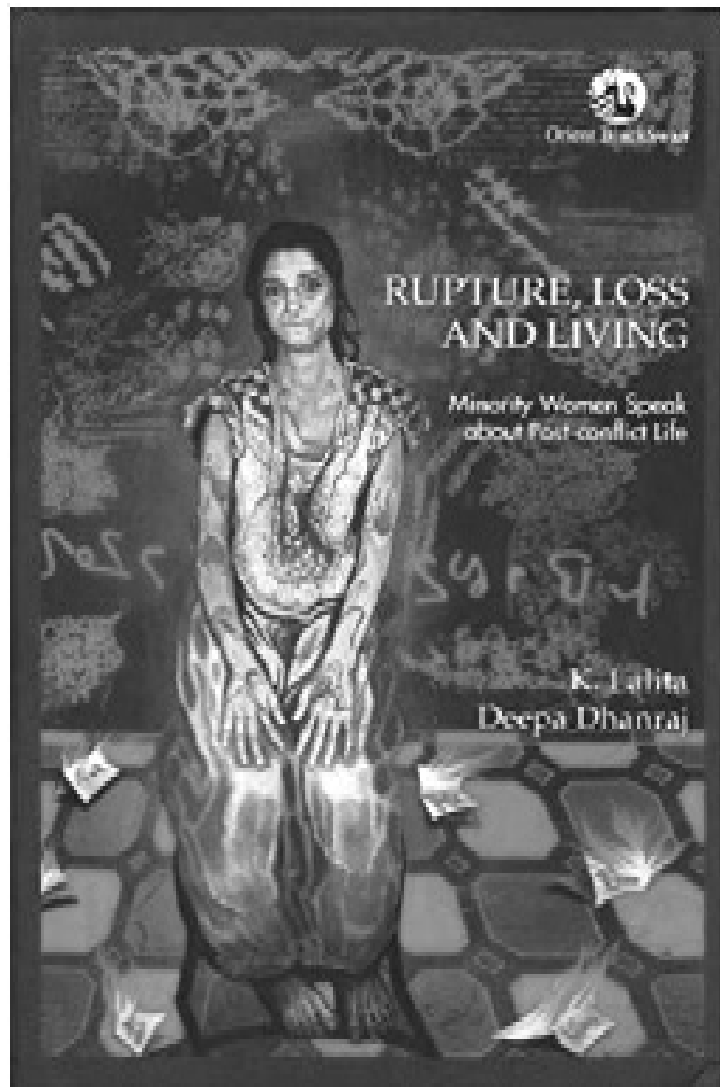
Feeling Hopeful

Movements include fights, jealousy, arguments, faith, tears & disagreements the real spirit is how we deal them to sustain humanity.

Chandramukhi was kidnapped on 27th November early morning, 11 day before the Legislative election. Fearing her well-being, she was reported missing to the police soon enough. The state does not always directly

mete out violence towards transgender people. Often they play the role of silent spectator, and do nothing when acts of violence are committed against them, this case being no exception. However, she managed to escape from her captors and returned to Hyderabad on 29th morning. Rachana expresses this sentiment after Chandramukhi's safe return. The same day, she also posts pictures of herself in a public procession rallying for Chandramukhi.

And thus, goes on her struggle against oppression with few but significant successes on her way. Her strength and patience to find solidarity among sometimes seemingly disparate voices is what makes her so effective and relevant. Thank you Rachana for being so awesome.



First Generation Dalit Women's Experiences in Hyderabad

■ Madhavi Mirapa

Where are the Indian women in the process of development and globalization? Why they are migrating to cities? How they are facing the challenges of education, careers, jobs and life in general are surprising. What is the socio-economic background of Dalit young women who are migrating to the Hyderabad city? What are the reasons behind coming to the city? This article tries to shed some light on these questions through a discussion of the

experiences of first generation Dalit women who are migrating to the city of Hyderabad. It is based on the project "City and Sexuality: A Study of Youth Living and Working in Hyderabad" done at Anveshi, which focuses on experiences of migrated young women in city of Hyderabad.

Why are these women migrating? The general meaning of migration is moving out of your place for the purpose of education,

job, marriage and self-sustenance. It is well known that the agrarian crisis in the rural areas and urban centric development process i.e. socio-politico-economic factors play important role in migration. Generally urban migration takes place for the betterment in livelihood and employment opportunities.

Dalit women from different classes come to the city. Whatever class they belong to, all have to struggle for their survival and existence. Most of them belong to the lower classes and very few of them belong to the educated background. Hyderabad assimilates all and every one. The struggle of balancing between old and new experiences for surviving successfully in the city is unique.

Young Dalit Women's Experiences

Discussing the difference between the experience of living in a village and the city, a Dalit women pursuing the nursing course said that the upper castes discriminate against them in the village. Even the Muslims too behaved like them but she found the situation to be very different in city. Here Muslims interact as equals, sit and eat with them without any fuss. In the village temple, they were allowed to see the idol by standing at the bottom of the staircase but in the city, they are allowed to enter in the temple and



perform all the rituals. All these things have created a kind of self confidence in them, which makes them happy.

After arriving in the city and interacting with its environs the consciousness expanded. When they go back to the village and try to express this consciousness and ideas, the upper-class locals react by saying, 'you went to city to earn livelihood and learned few new things. After coming back to the village don't try to teach us. The village has its own customs which you should follow when you are here'. This problem of discrimination is known to everyone but nobody seems to take it seriously. Everybody accepts it as part of village culture.

According to another young woman, in her seven years of stay in the city she has not experienced any open caste discrimination. Anybody can go anywhere even temples and nobody bothers about caste.

On the other hand, the city does not leave them much time or space to think about anything beyond their work and needs. The majority of them are busy in meeting their needs, and are engrossed in protecting their jobs. Two sisters who are working in a shopping mall said that as they don't have good educational qualifications and are from poor families, they had to take up whichever job was available to them but they hope to find better jobs in the future. Their job requires them to stand for full working hours in the mall, makes them extremely tired. Their off days are spend tending to tired bodies. The meagre salaries do not allow them to go out to eat or explore the city in any way. They also feel insecure going out. They indulge themselves once in a while by buying a packet of biryani to eat at home.

They too agree that discrimination is less in the city compared to their village. In village, attacks keep happening and they don't get any support from family. Such an experience of growing up has made them insecure even in the city. The family is not in a condition to offer any support. And they know that if they take risk and it goes awry, then their parents will get affected. They say that in city they can wear modern dresses which they could not do in the village. Equally important, talking to others (from other castes) was difficult in village, whereas in the city nobody bothers about the caste of the person who one is talking to.

Coming to the city, searching for employment, learning new languages- all these have given them tremendous self-confidence. According to a nursing graduate, "before coming to the city I spoke only Telugu, but after interacting with the patients I could speak in English as well as Hindi and able to read doctors' prescriptions, take his instructions in treating the patients. I have not learnt much in the village but changed a lot in every sense after coming to the city. My dress, food habits, hair style has changed. In Hyderabad when I arrived first, I was not aware of the bus routes and also, I was scared. Now I can go alone anywhere in the city to do the job."

According to the two sisters mentioned above, "we had a language problem earlier but after constantly interacting with people of different language backgrounds and by giving information about the products, we have learnt to speak Hindi. This improved our self-confidence along with our earnings. In the village, there were no economic opportunities except working in the fields. Working and studying is almost impossible in the villages. When we first arrived, we did not know anybody,

except our long-distance cousin. Now we are so habituated to the city that we are confident that we can work anywhere and live in the city."

Conclusion

They are supporting themselves through the minimum education received. The liberty and economic freedom in the city provides them opportunities to interact with people from different socio-economic background. Aware of the severe limitations that the caste-class order has imposed on them - lack of education, opportunities, family support - they try to make best of the opportunities. The city gives them a breathing space by not imposing direct caste discrimination but by imposing long working hours, meagre salaries it imposes an indirect discrimination making their life hard in the city.

Madhavi Mirapa was part of Anveshi City and Sexuality project in 2016-18.

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Ode to Leaving

■ Nabina Das

*Never love in a hurry —
it churns the mercury within us, so
give the nights their swooning shot
lull each day to curl in with the drift*

*Right now the clouds gather electricity
the hills of Maula Ali court nightbirds
the evening has only come about
among frantic traffic and my desires*

*The one-legged carts of bajjis in the rain
the cheap rum spills in the puddles
salt mixing with the laburnum gone grey
— nothing but love worming inside us*

*Never forget too long —
like trash lying by the wayside
still smelling of roses from the courier-man
a little rancid, lust-lilted, but pining alright*

**Nabina Das is a poet and writer based in Hyderabad.
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URMILA CONDUCTS

Understanding work and gender in Hyderabad

■ Devayani Prasad, Anusha Sundar

Our correspondence with Urmila was established through an encounter with a bus driver at TSRTC. We met Urmila on bus route 65M that travelled between Falaknuma and Mehdiapatnam. We reached Afzalgunj bus stop at 8 A.M., not knowing that her bus had been delayed or (most importantly) what she looked like. After having waited for nearly an hour and a half, peeping into each bus to see if it had a female bus conductor, we finally boarded a small bus with only one hint of acknowledgement from a small woman with cropped hair (whom we presumed to be Urmila in our hurried state!) and went to sit at the back where only men usually sit. The bus driver, Krishna, was a

jovial fellow who was very keen to know what we were up to and constantly kept himself in the loop by asking about us.

On the proposed Sunday, we boarded the bus at Falaknuma Bus Depot and bought a full day pass. Since it was Sunday and the month

of Ramzan, it was a slow morning. Urmila was simultaneously pursuing a Masters' degree in Public Administration from Ambedkar Open University in the hope of being upgraded to a desk job at TSRTC. While her husband worked as an accountant in a jewelry shop owned by her Uncle, Urmila maintained that she was encouraged to take up a job at TSRTC right after school as it provided a steady income. Throughout our bus journey, Urmila was constantly on her phone, updating her husband about her day and inquiring about his.

One of the first things that struck us was the amusing relationship Urmila shared with Krishna- a blend of professional and personal. As Krishna boarded the bus after ten minutes of an agitated phone call at the Charminar stop over, Urmila said:





"What happened anna? Why are you so frustrated?"

"Argh. My children, they have no idea how to cook rice. Grown up children! This is absolutely embarrassing. What if we had guests?!"

"Oh, children just need to be taught. You can't expect them to be born with natural rice-cooking talent!"

"They're supposed to have learnt by now."

"Just teach them. Wait, you know how to cook rice, don't you?"

Confessional silence

"Well, no wonder! All of you come home one day, and I'll teach you to cook a meal! Now, stop moping around. We are late for the next trip!"

Hailing from Srisailam in Mahaboobnagar district, Urmila moved to Hyderabad with her newly married husband in 1994.

Although she vehemently denies having had any initial interest in the job she does, stating that she has become a conductor only for the money, Urmila does not disagree that she has come to enjoy her work.

"It's the people you meet. One can't not make friends here."

That was indeed true. At the stopover for breakfast at Charminar, we met a community of bus drivers and conductors sharing the table, food and gossip. Mahalakshmi, a bus conductor working on the Charminar-Golconda route was a particular delight to encounter. A state level athlete, Mahalakshmi was a strong woman both in her build and her words. Bold and vivacious, her jovial jabs and sharp sarcasm spared nobody.

Embarrassed by her friend's continuous outbursts, Urmila apologetically mentioned, *"She is from Dhulpet."* We learned later that Dhulpet was infamous for three reasons- production of country liquor, construction of Ganesh idols, and riots.

"I am a no-nonsense kind of person. If anybody misbehaves or refuses to buy a ticket, I ask Krishna anna to take the bus straight to the local Police Station. It always works."

Our day trip with her proved that she needed no help navigating the bus and the sea of passengers. Urmila maintained that the absence of toilets on the routes was the primary challenge of this profession and needed to be immediately addressed by the authorities. The failure to do so until now has severely affected the health of many workers who often have to go long hours without using the toilet. We observed that Urmila herself used the toilet only once during her seven hour shift at the Charminar bus stop because she felt it was the only usable one.

The Law Officer of the TSRTC informed us about the importance of the Workmen Compensation Act that covers matters such as if a worker works an extra hour, he/she has to be paid twice the amount i.e. for two hours





and if he/she works a day which is a holiday, he/she is entitled to a compensatory off. Most people applying for the post of the bus conductor are overqualified (the minimum qualification required is a 10th class certificate). Although this is not necessarily the preferred job for many, the lack of employment in their chosen fields often left them with little choice. There are several women who often start work as bus conductors and move onto technical/IT jobs on computers within TSRTC.

While the minimum age required is 21 years, most TSRTC employees are usually between 25-30 years of age. Apart from a few who are single, most female bus conductors are married and work to support their family, since the husband may have a non-secure job.

According to Deputy Chief Manager at Jubilee Bus Station, women bus conductors in the TSRTC are offered many benefits. All TSRTC employees are provided with 15 casual leaves but women get an extra 3 days. They are provided three breaks for ten minutes each during their shifts which last for seven and a half hours. Women are largely exempted from late night shifts and a policy

of one day of the week off is maintained for all employees. Although there is no separate worker's union for women, we gathered that all unions played an active role in voicing women's issues. Interestingly, we found that although women are included in the union, they do not hold many posts, a fact that both the DCM and Urmila found striking. Over many years, the demands of female bus

conductors have included: more paid leave, better sanitation facilities, day duties, light and sophisticated duties (like in AC buses as they are slightly more expensive, and are not as crowded). While most of these demands were highly motivated by caution and safety, the desire to exercise a certain degree of comfort (air-conditioned buses, small buses etc.) in the workspace can also be noted. However, in such issues, the case of seniority was strictly maintained and such desires were seldom translated into realities.

The number of women in the workspace has increased over the years but they still seem dismally low. In Hyderabad city there are a total of 9000 conductors, of which 1600-1800 are female bus conductors. "Since the 1990s the number of female bus conductors in the organization has gone up", says the Deputy Chief Manager. As a woman overlooking all the Depots, she is of the opinion that there is a decent female representation. Of the 95 depot managers in Hyderabad city, twelve are women, a figure she feels is nominal considering they have risen with time. Women get hundred and eighty days of maternity leave and a request for extension is often agreed to by the TSRTC. According to the DCM, most women employees do come back to work after their pregnancy in order to add extra income to the household. The income earned by both male and female bus conductors is the same and increases with seniority – bus conductors start with Rs. 6000 as their base income per month and senior





employees receive up to Rs. 20,000. Legal provisions do not allow for women to be employed as bus drivers due to the common perception of them being physically weak for heavy vehicle duties.

Travelling by bus not only exposed us to different parts of the city and its numerous *gullies*, but also helped us understand the bus as the lifeline of the city—a melting pot of all classes. Class featured as a major barrier for us through the course of the study since our middle class backgrounds often made us outsiders to many people's lives. While we also wanted this project to cover Urmila's life outside of work and how she balanced her

household with her workspace, obtaining access to her home proved to be a challenge that we weren't able to overcome. Working with Urmila for an entire shift not only exposed us to the difficulties of the work of a conductor but also to the life away from home that she leads and has come to enjoy. Her job has provided her with a family outside of her home, one that she keenly acknowledges and involves even in her personal "home" life.

During the course of the project we came to realize that Urmila didn't operate as a stand-alone individual but thrived within her professional community. We hope to expand

this project to study how women build and interact in professional communities and navigate workspaces.

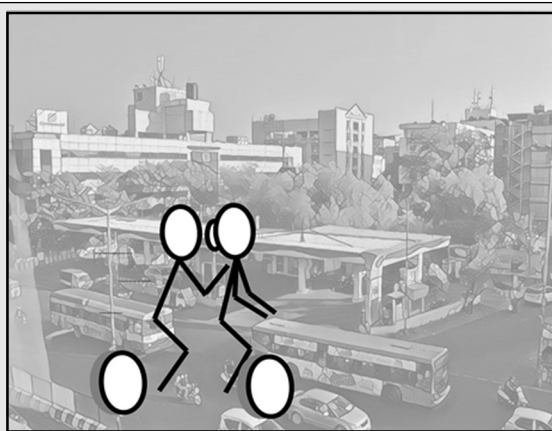
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(This piece is an outcome of a summer internship in 2016, done at Anveshi Research Centre for women's studies).



Ishq Mein Sheher Hona
Three poems by Ravish Kumar

*Today I feel like a small town....
And me, like a metro!
Yes, whenever I cross South Ex,
I feel like Karawal Nagar.
Shut Up! You are mad! In Delhi,
Everybody feels like Delhi.*

It is not like that! Everything is not Delhi in Delhi! Just as

Love is not there in everyone's eyes.

OK, so how did I become South Ex?

The way I became Karawal Nagar.

You are right.....

*If this Barapula flyover was not there,
the distance between South Ex and Sarai Kale Khan would never have decreased.*

Do you love me or the city?

City! Because you are my city!

In Sarai Julaina of South Delhi- in a village of Jats,

A city of nurses from Kerala have been established,

who work in Escorts, Holy family and Apollo.

With every rented rooms, their/her dreams kept on changing.

She kept taking care of heart patients but her own was stuck on the old landlord's son.

She started loving Sarai Julaina so much, that she opened an eatery there – Malabar hotel.

There was no other way to wait!

I am only changing the room!

Not the city!

There are so many memories in this

room in Pushp Vihar and you

say that only the room has changed.

Look, tenants don't have their own city.

Nobody knows, how many cities stay in the million houses of Delhi.

These poems have been published in *Ishq Mein Sheher Hona*, Rajkamal Prakashan, 2015.

Translated from Hindi by Rani Rohini Raman

'Why did you let him shoot that?': An Indian woman's story of "revenge porn"

■ Neha Dixit

Aradhana moved around the dimly lit kitchen, softly humming a song. Her melody was punctuated by the sound of a fallen saucepan and water droplets from a leaking tap. She was between sleep and wakefulness when her phone alarm rang again at 6.15 am. When she tried to swipe it off, someone spoke from the phone. 'Hello?'

'Hello? Yes, Sulakshana? Yeah, I will be at the stop at 8...

Hello? Your voice is breaking up. Let's talk in the cab...Okay. See you.'

As soon as Aradhana got into the taxi she shared with her colleagues, Sulakshana whispered into her ear, 'Why did you let him shoot all that stuff?'

'What? Who?' Aradhana was confused.

'Just keep quiet, and don't react. Look at this.' Putting her phone on mute, Sulakshana opened

a WhatsApp video sent by their colleague, Shashank.

Aradhana froze when she saw it. She hoped it was some kind of spam, but as she watched further, her heart sank. She nearly threw up at the sight of her naked body. 'I thought I would die in that moment,' she recalls. 'I walked out of the cab as soon as it stopped to pick up the next staffer. Sulakshana got down with me.'

They took an auto back to her house.

It had taken Manish a lot of convincing for Aradhana to agree to living together just six months into their relationship. 'It will work out well financially, and we can spend more time together,' he had told her. 'It will be good for us to know each other better.' All of this made sense to her. The only thing she was worried about was that it might upset her mother. But she was all grown up now, financially

independent, and she knew that she alone was responsible for her decisions.

They moved into a one BHK apartment in Greater Noida, with makeshift furniture they purchased from the local scrap dealer. That evening, Manish came home with a bottle of wine. He lit candles, and it was a beautiful evening. They stayed up the whole night, and they couldn't keep their hands off each other.

Manish had bought a new phone. They looked lovely in those pictures, their shiny, bright skin glowing in blissful intimacy. He came up with a plan. He propped the phone up on a selfie stick on top of a large mirror, and placed it right next to the mattress. The phone recorded a video.

When Manish made chai in the morning, they watched the clip in bed, wrapped up inside a quilt. 'I felt so loved, I was high on it,' Aradhana says. Manish sent her the clip on her phone too. Every few weeks, he would bring it up and text, 'Ready for Seasons 2, 3, 4?' Aradhana was initially uncertain, but over time she began to look forward to it. These were moments they shared, 'that were unique to both of us,' she says. Every time they had an argument, one of them would bring up a frame from the clip, and they'd soon kiss and make up.

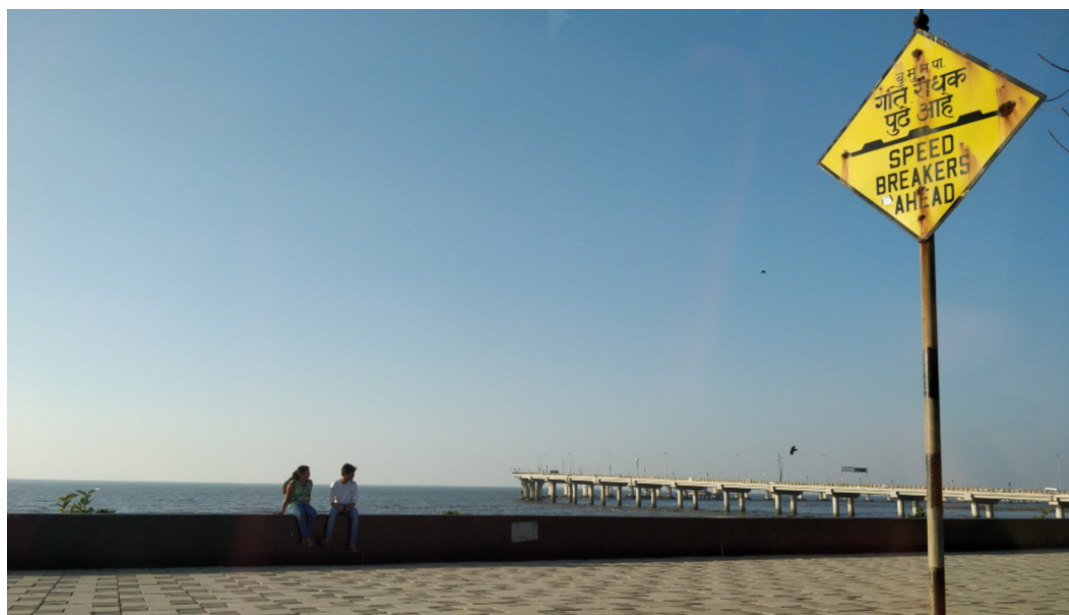
A year after they moved in together, Aradhana was promoted to team leader. Manish was still a call centre executive. 'Manish was very happy for me initially but soon enough started feeling threatened,' she recalls. 'His friends would tease him. They would say, "Taken permission from the boss before stepping out for a smoke?"'

They had started their careers together but Aradhana got two promotions in two years, while Manish was still struggling to get good ratings at the company. 'I was earning more and appreciated more. This got to him, I guess.'

Manish began using her debit card for his own expenses: shopping, buying gifts for his family, paying for rounds of beer for his friends. Aradhana initially tolerated this, but soon enough began getting angry with Manish's behaviour.

Manish also started hitting her. Over the next six months, the violence increased. 'He would hit me for just about anything — for overcooked *daal* or for speaking on the phone for too long.'

That's when Aradhana decided to break up. It didn't go down well with Manish.



She rang Shashank, her colleague who had sent Sulakshana the video. He told her that Manish had sent it on WhatsApp to everyone in office with the message, 'How to get the Chandu bitch laid: Season 1.' He said that Manish had also uploaded the video online.

'Sulakshana asked me not to go online but I couldn't stop. I looked for the video. It was freshly uploaded, just two days back. And it had more than 2,000 views. It was there on ten websites and there was a smaller Youtube version as well. I didn't know how to reach the websites to ask them to pull them down.'

Aradhana cried hysterically. 'My entire life came crashing down in front of my eyes. I thought of jumping into the *naala* next to my house. Sulakshana calmed me down. She asked me to go step by step to resolve this.'

Sulakshana called up their boss to get her advice. 'We were fortunate that our boss was a woman. She offered to come to my house in the evening and talk about it.'

A gamut of thoughts were running through Aradhana's mind: We had rented the apartment telling the landlord we are married. Will they call me a slut? What will my uncles back home who were opposed to my coming to Delhi say? What about my mother who always defended my decisions? How will I face my office colleagues? Will I still be allowed to continue my job?

'I had never in my dreams thought that Manish would do such a thing. How could he have so much bitterness for someone he claimed to love? So much animosity? So much hatred? That too when he very well knew that it was a big deal for me to live with him, to even be in a relationship with him.'

They headed back home. By the afternoon, her boss, Ankita, arrived. Ankita had worked in the organisation for eight years and was a programme manager. She was in her mid-30s, extremely sensitive and efficient. Aradhana says, 'I was hardly able to tell her what had happened. I was so ashamed of myself. She consoled me and told me that there is no reason I should feel ashamed for trusting the person (that) I loved. That acted as a corkstopper for all my exploding emotions. Honestly, my job mattered the most to me.'

Ankita told her that a similar case had come up in the company two years ago. She said Aradhana was not the first woman to go

through this, and that she should hold herself together and learn to deal with it.

Ankita called up the company lawyer, who asked them to be present at a specific police station in Noida in an hour. 'I just didn't want to go down that road but Ankita was adamant. She said to get up and face it.'

Aradhana's case is what is commonly labelled 'revenge porn', a misnomer for the non-consensual distribution of sexual imagery or videos. There is no conclusive data on the number of such crimes in India, especially because they often go unreported. The National Crime Records Bureau data suggests that between 2012 and 2014 there has been a 104 percent rise in the 'transmission of obscene content in electronic form'. Most cases like Aradhana's are filed under this category.

The Station House Officer (SHO) was accompanied by the company lawyer. The SHO asked for Manish's picture and phone number, and said to Aradhana: 'Never do this, whether you are married or unmarried, ever again. Don't you read the newspaper? Don't you know how it is being misused every single day?' Aradhana and the others were expecting a long moral lecture that did not follow. The lawyer asked them to leave and assured action.

Ankita made Aradhana promise that she would come to office the next day. 'I was up the whole night. I kept messaging him but there was no response. I kept checking the websites two or three times every hour. The comments under the video were making me cringe and hate myself. It was nice to have Sulakshana over that night or I would have definitely committed suicide.'

The next day, a few Hindi newspapers reported the case without disclosing her name or place of work. 'That shook my confidence a bit,' she says.

Three months have passed. Aradhana has never called or texted Manish since that day.

Manish returned to work, but Ankita advised Aradhana against making a complaint. 'She said that the company neither has a sexual harassment committee nor will it be wise to go down that route, since the senior bosses may not understand the situation very well and that may harm me.'

Manish was laid off within a month on grounds of non-performance.

Out of the ten websites the video was posted on, the police have managed to get only three to remove the clip. It still exists on the others. 'I don't know if my colleagues who received the clip circulated it further. If the police couldn't do much, it is beyond my control too. I had to understand that.'

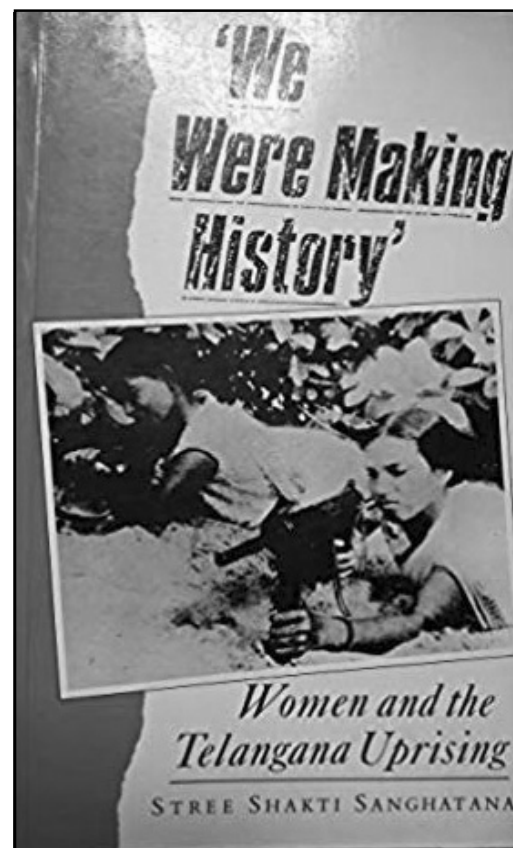
Aradhana has been reading articles about revenge porn online. She knows there are lawyers working on revenge porn cases in India, but for now, she wants some distance from the whole thing. 'Maybe one day, when I am more financially secure and successful, I will become vocal about it. But right now it's too early. I need some space. I have decided to concentrate on fixing my life rather than wasting it on teaching that man a lesson.'

**Names changed*

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This is an edited version of the essay originally Published on Deep Dives (deepdives.in) as part of the series Sexing the Interwebs. <https://deepdives.in/why-did-you-let-him-shoot-that-an-indian-woman-story-of-revenge-porn-dd7acd6e55f2> (dated 3 Nov 2017) Excerpted by MA Moid.



The burqa and the rickshaw

■ Javeed Alam

Hyderabad is in flux. Unbelievably rapid and far-reaching changes have been taking place in the city over the last few decades. Let me start to unravel these by taking two unusual emblems, both of which I would like to look at as indicators of the 'epic of modernity'.

The *burqa* – a veil the Muslim women wear which extends from head to toe and covers the body – is visible across the city. The burqa is ubiquitously present even in the most posh and modern areas of Hyderabad. The *rickshaw* – the tri-wheeler, manually driven and used to commute – has nearly disappeared from the city. It is now rarely seen even in the poorest and most backward areas. The few that are left carry goods. Hyderabad had the largest number of rickshaws compared to any city in India; it was once referred to as the city of rickshaws.

The presence of the burqa in the posh and modern areas and the absence of rickshaws in the poorest and backward areas is somewhat of an incongruity, a departure from the expected, and therefore calls for attention.

How can the burqa be part of the epic of modernity? Well, people have read it, as is the wont, as a rise of conservatism and religiosity among the Muslim community. It may or may not be so; I think it is a bit of both, as in all communities in India. But that is, I presume, the wrong way of looking at the problem. What has actually happened is that the invisible has become visible, all too quickly. *Purdah* – keeping the woman's body from public view – has always been common among conventional Muslim families. Only 30 years ago, education and employment were very uncommon among Muslim women



who came from simple, lower middle class backgrounds. Most Muslim women lived their lives in the confines of the home, rarely going beyond the circle of relatives. But the observance of *purdah* was quite common when in the public domain. Covering oneself with a *chadar* – a long unstitched cloth to cover the face and body – was enough. A sea change is taking place without any fundamental shift in attitudes to the women's body or person. What has been changing is the socio-economic context within which life is being lived.

Those who were *very* poor are still *quite* poor with some degree of marginal upward mobility. But what has rather pronouncedly changed is the life of the lower middle classes. A sizeable section of these groups have seen a noticeable upward movement in income and life opportunities. Education has seen an enormous expansion. And what is unusual is that it has been a trend set by the women. More often Muslim boys have preferred to go abroad, to the oil rich Middle Eastern countries and have bailed their families out of destitution and hardship. There is extra income available for meeting the necessities of life. Women in these families have taken to education in a big way; the girl child is making the best of the opportunities available within the constraints of religious conventions. The emphasis is on technical and job oriented education

including the emerging frontier areas of IT education.

What we see as an increase in the visibility of the burqa is actually women out in the public sphere, educating themselves and working in sectors of economy which were completely hidden from their view even twenty years ago. More often, these women credit it to the grace of God (!), the Allah of their faith. They meticulously observe their religion and the burqa is seen as an integral part of their world. How much of it is imposed by the men in the family or reflects their own desire is difficult to say.

Where is the burqa most visible? Around the colleges and educational institutions, IT coaching centres like NIIT, the commercial establishments, offices, and so on. They ride with burqas on their motorbikes and mopeds and fill up the seats reserved for women in the buses. It is not like Saudi Arabia where the women are forced to stay at home, and venture outside only when accompanied by their men. These women are more often alone. They go together to ice-cream parlours and beauty saloons and sometimes chat in public places with their boy friends. We know they are Muslim women, but unlike other women we do not know how they look, their faces are hidden but their work is as visible as that of any other women. They inhabit the modern world but modernity, as

yet, remains undefined to them. What will happen in the future is uncertain. History will no longer be a guide. I am not sure if this poses a problem; I would rather see it as a challenge to understand the way in which the world is changing.

The story of the disappearance of the rickshaw is far less complicated. In the mid-1970s, auto-rickshaws (three-wheeler, mechanically driven, mini-taxis) made an appearance. Over the next 15 years they slowly replaced the rickshaw. In the 1970s and early 1980s Hyderabad was viewed as a city in decline. There was though a noticeable migration of people to different parts of the world for work. Where one went and for what kind of work varied a great deal in terms of social status and the consequent levels of education. Nevertheless, Andhra Pradesh and Hyderabad in particular contributed a good deal to the making of the Indian diaspora. Among the Muslims, a lot of people from among the lower and lowest middle classes went out, especially to the Middle Eastern countries following the boom generated by petro dollars.

Secondly, in the 1990s, there was a burst of growth in construction activity centred on the building of flyovers, commercial establishments, and multistoried residential complexes, followed by the making of the Hi-Tech city. New opportunities opened up for different kinds of work. A couple of factors contributed to the change. With some money coming in from migrant relatives living abroad, and opportunities opening up with the expansion of the city, people shifted to auto rickshaws, construction work, repair and maintenance, and other such activity. What facilitated this was the slow expansion of education coupled with quotas in employment for Dalits and Other Backward Classes (henceforth OBCs); the poor moved into *adjacent* blue and white-collar jobs. (Of the few rickshaws that have remained, it is the Dalits who have been left behind, plying goods in rickety ones. The rickshaw puller as a group comprised of Dalits, Muslim and some OBCs.)

The disappearance of the rickshaw does not mark the *end of poverty*; it only indicates a relatively pronounced *decline in destitution*, though both are still present in a visible way. It is the story of marginal

mobility into adjacent positions requiring higher skill levels. And this, I think, is important in that it is a source of self-esteem and therefore also marks a demand for *recognition* as equals. Ideologies based on egalitarian values informed by community commitments are in the ascendance all over. This, therefore, is also the source of new aspirations.

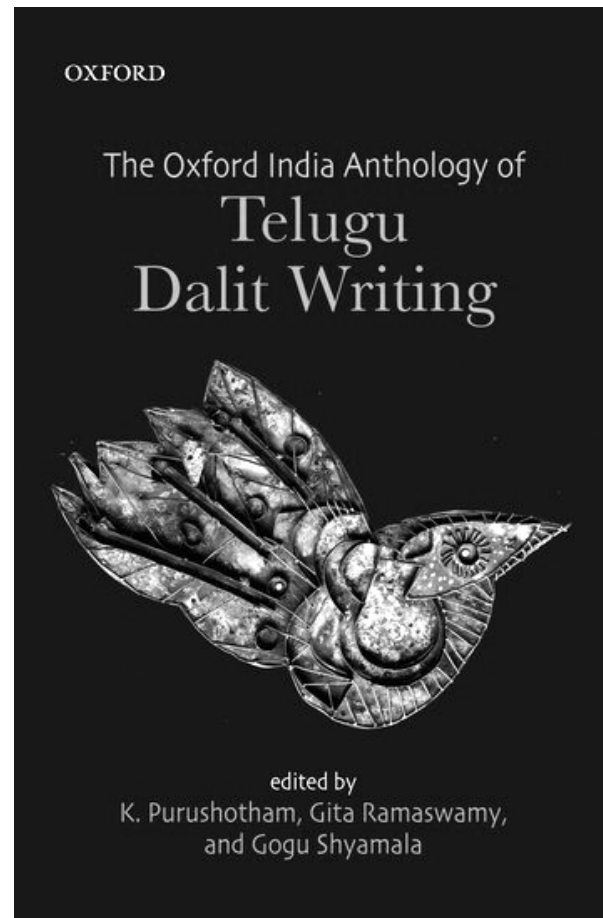
The priorities in the family have undergone a major change. People now strive for better houses – the old type of hut will no longer do. They want to see their children in schools, to better their lives. The mental horizon of choices is expanding, adding to those margins of freedom where life undergoes re-definitions. This process has been facilitated by the steady working, despite its infirmities, of democracy. The democratic process is opening doors and people are moving out, against all odds, into new spaces where different demands from the world await them. How these are being met are the new biographies being written by ordinary people. Within the successes achieved, tragic endings and mental pathos is also visible all over.

If we put these two developments together, the appearance of the burqa and the

disappearance of the rickshaw, a shift of immense consequence lies below, hidden from view, which needs to be drawn out. I would like to suggest here, a little audaciously, that everyday life for the people of Hyderabad has become of central importance. What matters for them most are the rhythms of ordinary, this-worldly life. It is the open side of modernity, unencumbered by universal values, the central importance of the mundane and ordinary in the making of ones happiness.

I am not suggesting that religion has disappeared or become less important. In fact, it is quite to the contrary. It is more visible and, perhaps, matters more today to both Hindus and Muslims. But it does not, and this is the great change, trump everyday life as earlier. The simultaneous presence of both, religion and everyday life, and their increasing importance at the same moment, reminds me of a comment Marx made that modernity is the 'contradictions of progress'. And this is what an epic, as a genre, is all about.

(Excerpted in fond memory of Javeed Alam, by MA Moid. Seminar 585: City of Hope, May 2008 (pp 42-44))



Thoughts about Gender and Space in the City of Hyderabad

■ Tejaswini Madabhushi

Hyderabad for Feminism (HfF) was formed in June 2013, six months after Midnight March, Hyderabad. Midnight March was organized with an aim to claim the night spaces for women and make them safe for all genders. Though the idea to organise this walk was conceived by Natha and me a few months ago (based on an experience we had while walking at night), we found the momentum to do it after the brutal gang rape in Delhi, 2012.

The idea of women marching in the middle of the night pulled a lot of people and groups together and it was collectively organized by all of us. The numbers soared to few thousands on Jan 5th, 2013, much to surprise of the organizers. A lot of participants in the march had come to protest against the Delhi rape and were not necessarily invested in the idea of occupying night spaces. There were even a few men there who were upset when they were asked to march behind the women and called it 'reverse sexism'. Their argument was that they were equally hurt by the rapes in the country, but clearly, they failed to understand that walking in the middle of the night meant something really significant for the women.

Though the success left us thrilled and enthused, the numbers and energy from this march did not result in anything tangible immediately after. Despite a wide coverage in the press and live telecast by almost all the Telugu TV channels, the discussions were limited to punishment for the rapists. The proposition of making public spaces

accessible to all as a way to curb sexual violence did not gain the prominence we had hoped for. We also realized that it is not easy for a lot of young women to meet feminist groups or become a part of the feminist movement and there is a need for a space of discussion about and action on this problem.

Hyderabad for Feminism was formed to address the above issues. It was formed as a Facebook group and we also met on weekends in parks and public spaces. The meetings were a place for new people to meet each other and share their experiences and thoughts on current issues. A lot of these conversations involved women sharing their experiences of sexual harassment in public places. It emerged that sexual assault by known people was too personal for most people to share in such a setting.

Given these discussions, and the limits to what was possible through them, the first few events organised by HfF were centered around occupying public places. Apart from occupying public places, we also held street plays to raise awareness on street harassment and organised cultural events to challenge existing patriarchal cultural norms.

In the current moment we are interested in the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace and we are holding discussions and organizing events on the same. The Telugu actor Sri Reddy and others who started campaign against sexual harassment and exploitation in the Telugu film industry and India's #metoo movement continue to have a great influence on us.

I would like to focus here on HfF's engagement with public spaces and how we evolved through this engagement. Our first big event *Taboo Trail* took us to Irani Cafes and low cost "bar and restaurants" where women were unwelcome, though there was no explicit policy that forbids women. Some of the places have a "family section" where women were allowed, irrespective of whether one came in a group with family or with friends. The large number of women entering these places as part of this event caused some shock to both owners and existing customers. A friend who participated later expressed her deep discomfort in this event. She observed how the working-class men present there were intimidated by the middle-class women entering this space, causing some of them to leave. Some of us engaged with this phenomenon in order to reflect on our class and caste privilege and how our acts of occupying public spaces could be problematic. However, these places were also visited by middle class men with caste privilege, without causing the same discomfort to the customers and owners. This also can't be reduced simplistically to sexism and involves the ways in which the presence of privileged women may sometimes cause unease to working class men in places they hang out. The reasons for this anxiety need to be explored in more detail and our political interventions would have to be devised based on that. HfF did not conduct any more *Taboo Trail* events after that, at least not in an organised way with several women occupying the public space.

Another event that caused a similar need for reflection was a trek up the Moula Ali Dargah hillock. The event was organised by an individual in Hyderabad and attended by a few members of HfF. This was organised as an all women (cis and transwomen) event that involved trekking up Moula Ali and spending the night there. The Dargah as well the hill are a revered place for many, especially of the Shia community. The event meant different things to different members who went there together. For some it was to occupy public space, for some, to explore the historic site and the rest just wanted a bunch of women to spend time together, while watching the beautiful view from the top of the hill. We ended up eating food and playing *antakshari* while star gazing. The event was

reported in a leading newspaper the next day as girls having a fun night on the hill. This report has caused pain and hurt in the local Shia community and they voiced their concern against Moula Ali turning into a picnic spot for the city's youth. We meant no disrespect to any religious beliefs or to any group of people, but our understanding of the importance of this place was limited and we inadvertently hurt people. We did not foresee the implications of 'occupying' a space that had such great significance for the local community and this needed a radical review of our feminist activism. We tried making reparations to the community by offering our apology to the Principal Secretary, Minority

the years. We co-organised several events with Savitribai Phule Adhyayan Vedika, a dalit women's group from Osmania University, Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, and worked with the queer community in the city. From the time of the formation, several key members of Hff are queer identifying. Members of Hff took part in various queer events including the annual 'Queer Swabhimana Yatra'.

I am not aware of public spaces being inaccessible to cis gender people from various sexualities, but am certainly aware of many spaces, especially elite spaces being inaccessible to transgender friends. While

movies, they have no real engagement with the community nor do they have mechanisms in place to make their spaces queer friendly. I wonder what reception the transgender people would receive if they came in large numbers to occupy a fancy mall. Will they get the same support from mainstream society that cis-women get when we try to occupy urban spaces where we feel unwelcome?

Our experiences of occupying public spaces have been both thrilling and thought provoking. The feeling of liberation and satisfaction to be in a place where we are not supposed to be is inexplicable and I don't want to discount that experience. We are



Welfare in this regard.

Since Hyderabad for Feminism is a city-based group and focuses on the city issues, our engagement with the local groups is more prominent than other movements to occupy urban space. Some of us took part in the "Why Loiter?" campaign and posted pictures of us loitering on social media. We also marched with "I will go out", one of the groups working for reclaiming spaces for women, in January 2016 and collaborated with them later in organizing an event in Hyderabad.

Hyderabad for Feminism has collaborated with groups and communities in the city over

most of the transgender people are too intimidated to enter spaces like malls out of fear of humiliation, the few times they did try, they were treated disparagingly. In one such instance, a transwoman Vyjayanti Vasanta Mogli, was not allowed to enter a mall even when she went with a group of friends to watch a movie promoting queer rights. She was only able to enter after a long argument with security personnel and switching to English at the end of this exchange. This makes it evident that there is a lot of work that needs to be done in sensitizing employers and employees in public spaces like malls. While they want to be avant garde by screening queer themed

more cautious now and reflexive about the kind of spaces we want to occupy and about the effects it has on the existing people in those spaces. I think we have also realized that more diversity in the group in terms of class, caste, gender of people trying to occupy public spaces is also an important factor to ensure that our actions cause least discomfort to marginalized people in the society and lead to more meaningful intervention in making public spaces more equal and democratic.

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The Meeting

■ Nabina Das

She steps out of the black and yellow taxi cab and looks around. Not because of any unfamiliarity. Mostly because she imagines someone else in these surroundings, not him. But is that even possible, this imagination? She hasn't even met him once. For the first time, they will walk into a room he has booked, for the first time she will know a person called Raj that smacked of Bollywood hero names. So many handsome men called Raj have walked about the silver screen in and out of women's lives with coffee cups in hand. Lives of Jazz, the name she has given herself today.

Chandni Chowk is resplendent tonight. Perhaps every night it is like that. Jazz doesn't know much. She knows the locality but doesn't come here every day. Every day is not her day of "meeting".

When Raj asked casually, perhaps chewing on a cigar or hard cigarette: what do you do, Jazz too notched up her casualness and said school teaching was her passion, especially, literature. She never understood though why he had to say: we might have a lot in common then. All she gathered was that he was a high flyer, literally, traveling from conference to conference as a consultant. But when he rang her and asked her for a "meeting", he insisted she bring her favorite book over.

The room is not dank exactly, not fresh either. Maybe it is the walls, slightly rough in the texture of a coarse powder and painted a faint dream-blue color with patches dark and light here and there. She has tiptoed to the window already and has seen that the street below their fourth floor. Chandni Chowk is gurgling tonight like a gem-studded night pigeon. Its wings are spread and taut in

grew back on her body. Lucky girl, J, friends squealed. You'll save your husband's money. What is this man's obsession with the back anyway, wonders Jazz, still feeling his glance sliding now from her wings to the small of the back right above where her buttocks start. Clearly, till now, he hasn't looked at her face as much.

Coffee arrives from the door and Raj opens it just enough apart following the knock. He collects it at the threshold while the room service lad quickly surveys the room like a weasel stuck at the door. No he hasn't seen Jazz because she has now stepped into the bathroom with its pink lollipop-green cupcake motifs. She hears voices behind the little glass window above the shower, close to the ceiling. It is dark outside but the voices are rather clear. She wonders if it is a terrace above and there are people sitting out there who can see inside the bathroom through the layered glass slides of the window opening, right into the shower.

Jazz, he calls, and she steps out into the room. Coffee, Jazz. He stirs the spoon and she quickly says, no sugar, no creamer, please. Now he looks at her face. Then nods. I thought so, Jazz.

"Sorry, this is not the best place I could find."

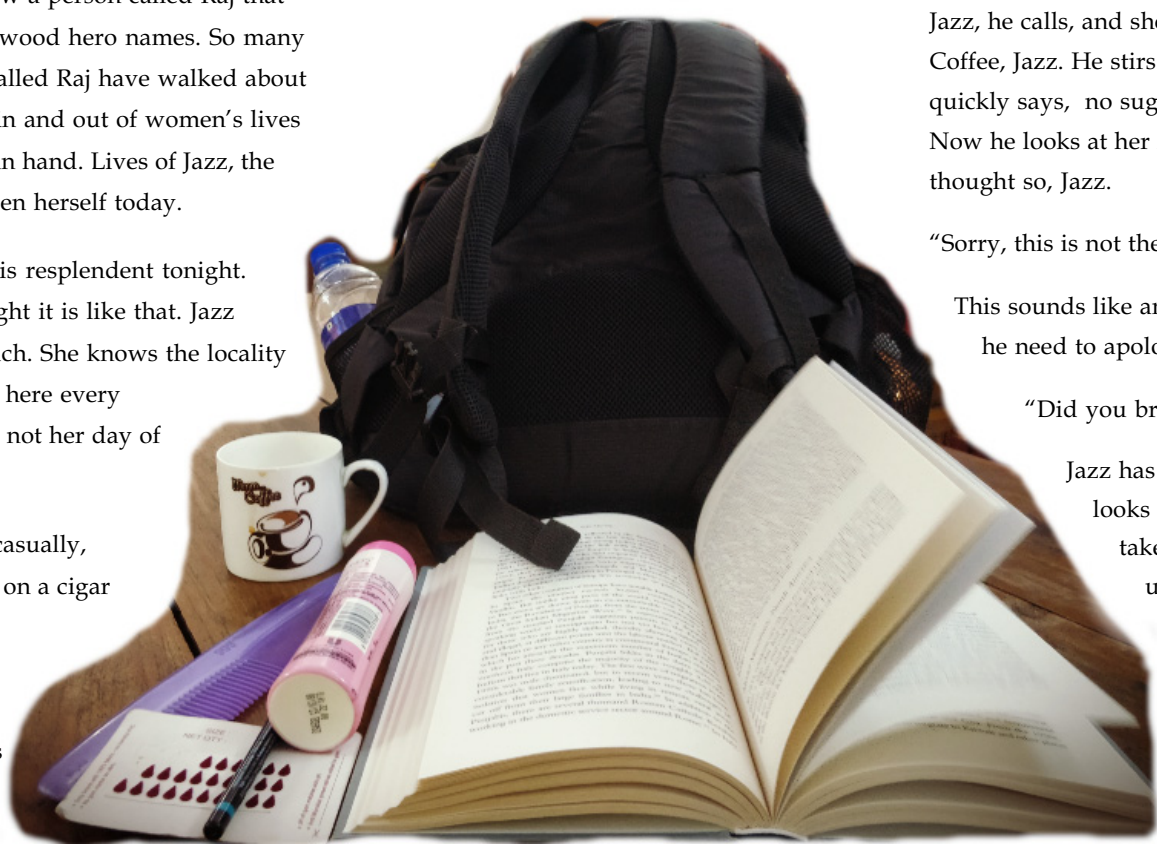
This sounds like an apology. But why does he need to apologize, she has no clue.

"Did you bring a book?"

Jazz has brought a book. She looks for it in her backpack. It takes her a while. The underwear straps and the nightwear laces obstruct her fingers. Then there are a couple of protein bars. For two occasions in the past – she hasn't added much to her

experience in this area – there was no dinner, instead, there was the bitter taste of being touched with coarse fingers and on one occasion, listening to tasteless ugly jokes. This second person had an obsession she realized. "Ma behen ma behen ma behen", and the refrain rang on and on in her head to turn into a "to be or not to be to be or not to be", and so on and so forth.

excitement or nervousness depending on the what she is thinking moment by moment. She feels Raj's steady stare at her calves, her back and her nape. Has he seen her face properly? She wonders if she should wash the perfume off her neck in case he wanted to nuzzle there. Her calves were smooth even without waxing. After two waxing sessions with college mates several years ago, no hair



She finds the book past a plastic packet that crackles at the touch. Condoms are her responsibility too, she firmly believes. For a moment though she wonders if Raj also got his own pack. Should she ask? That is not being bold, that is being cautious. But he looks relaxed sipping his coffee. Unlike the previous two, not rushed to pull her and peel her off from her skin.

“I was very curious about you,” Raj says between the cup and the froth. “The hobbies you mentioned. Not really usual here.”

Jazz wonders before her how many he had seen for a “meeting”. Because he seems to know the ‘usual’. It wouldn’t be right to ask perhaps. It’s not the rule of the business.

“I like the calves. Do you run?” He is slouching on the bed and waves at her to come sit next to him.

“N-no.” She is startled. “Just some exercise, gym, you know.” Her Capri pants sit snug at the mound of the muscle. She hesitates to take off her jutti sandals. Her nails are terrible and she was hoping there won’t be an occasion when she will have to stretch her legs and sit beside him on the bed. It has not happened in the earlier meetings.

He notices her fidgeting and bends down and looks at her jutti sandals. They are beautiful, he thinks. Embroidered and beaded.

Following his looks, Jazz remembers these shoes were bought from Chandni Chowk. One of the narrow lanes off the second hand market of bags and tees and sandals. About the time when she became a teacher of English literature.

“Really not my type, this place,” Raj says, as she finally settles down beside him. “Not yours too, I know. Look at the ceiling, like sawdust.”

*Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells*

Jazz mutters silently.

He hasn’t asked her to shower yet. She likes his eyes. They have crow’s feet at the corners. And the mouth. Not exactly smiling but with the coffee froth still visible, the lips seem like zapota fruits freshly sliced. He picks up the book from her hands with two fingers and thumbs open to the first page. His left hand cradles her nape, exactly where he was looking intently a while ago.

Outside, Chandni Chowk is all glittering and chaos. Cycle rickshaws are ringing their bells to outdo each other, taxicabs are crawling and screeching on their clutches, pedestrians are hurling abuses at cars trying to swerve past their footfalls, a street stall belching out “chunari chunari” in high decibels, and the sound of the hour’s express train chugging in to the sky in a muffled roar and puff from the Old Delhi Railway Station at a distance. The men on the terrace above the shower window seem to have gone since there was nothing to watch from the glass opening. Chandni Chowk is now a dancer, whirling crazy, throwing off her jutti sandals and bangles and hair ties. There is just one voice that takes over. Gently, urgently.

Let us go then, you and I

She will not ask what is it. They cradle the book together now, she wrapping her left arm on to his back.

Nabina Das is a poet and writer based in Hyderabad. Author of two poetry volumes and two fiction books, currently she is working on a series called “Diwani Dilli: Almost Love Stories”. This story was published in Kindle literary magazine. nabinamail@yahoo.com

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Lines that cut to the very gut

I am tempted to suggest that we think of Shyamala's stories as prototypes of a compact new genre that might be called, not a short, but a little story. The 'little' here would of course recall the intrepid independence of the little magazines that have nourished the Telugu reading public since the 1960s; it would make reference to Walter Benjamin's famous essay, "A little history of photography", that cuts deep to track over a quick few pages the photographic element's degeneration from the enchanted portraiture of its early years into a realist endorsement of middle class life; and it would point to the world of the little, subaltern traditions, as against that of the great traditions.

SUSI THARU, co-editor of the two-volume *Women Writing in India* and *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India*


GOGU SHYAMALA is a senior fellow at the Anveshi Research Centre for Women, Hyderabad. She has edited *Nallapoddu: Dalitha Shireeda Sahithyam 1921-2002* (Black Dawn: Dalit Women's Writings, 1921-2002).

This is her first collection of stories translated from Telugu.


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**Father
maybe an
elephant
and mother
only a small
basket,
but..**



**and mother
only a small
basket,
but..**

gogu
shyamala

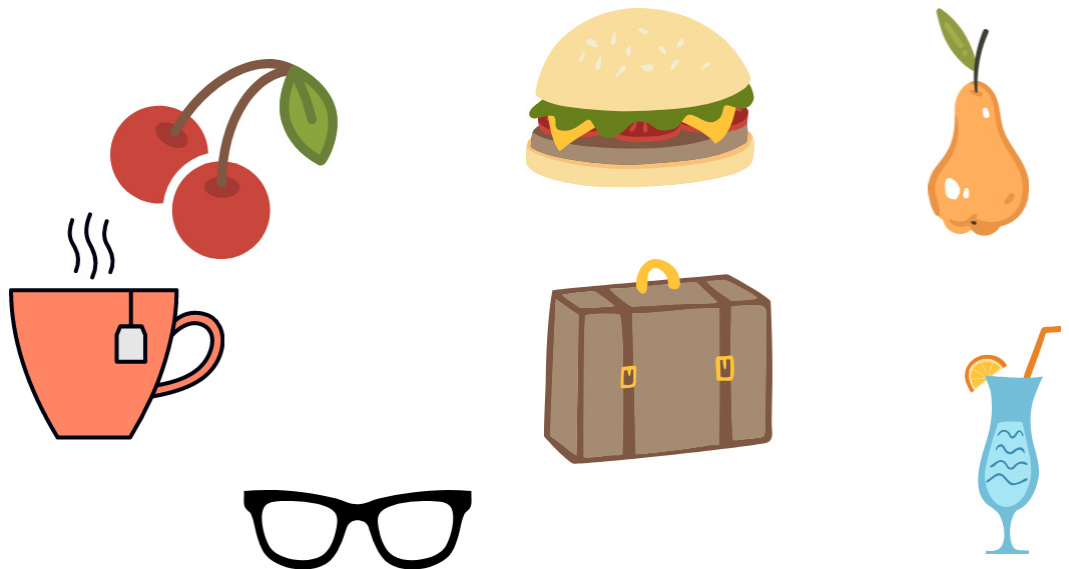
Gogu Shyamala's stories dissolve borders as they work their magic on orthodox forms of realism, psychic allegory and political fable. Whether she is describing the setting sun or the way people are gathered at a village council like 'thickly strewn grain on the threshing floor', the varied rhythms of a dalit drum or a young woman astride her favorite buffalo, Shyamala walks us through a world that is at once particular and small, and simultaneously universal.

Set in the madiga quarter of a Telangana village, the stories spotlight different settings, events and experiences, and offer new propositions on how to see, think and be touched by life in that world. There is a laugh lurking around every other corner as the narrative picks an adroit step past the grandiose authority of earlier versions of such places and their people—Romantic, Gandhian, administrative—and the idiom in which they spoke. These stories overturn the usual agendas of exit—from the village, from madiga culture, from these little communities—to hold this life up as one of promise for everyone.

With her intensely beautiful and sharply political writing, Shyamala makes a clean break with the tales of oppression and misery decreed the true subject of dalit writing.

Subway

■ Mohammed Khadeer Babu



“Shall we go, Mr. Senior” she asked, with a smile.

“Sure, Ms. Junior”, he joined her.

They chose the first table in the third row, their favourite among the beautiful tables designed in patterns of orange and yellow. Usually, their visit lasted fifteen minutes. Sometimes it stretched to thirty minutes. The brief interlude provided a relief from the utterly repetitive tasks that constituted their office work.

But that day was special. It wasn't like their regular breaks. Picking up the menu, she stated, “I will pay the bill today. You cannot say no.”

“Sure”.

She ordered *chata channa* and *aloo pattee*. Also for a coke can that they would share at the end.

“So”, she said.

“So” he responded.

They stared at each other. Words failed. They had been seeing each other for three years. They had known that this moment would arrive and tried to act as if they were prepared for this situation. She spoke to him as she were talking to a child,

“Try to get a proper lunch box in your new office. Keep some dry fruits in your desk to munch as a snack. Reduce the number of teas that you drink. Don't grow a beard as you did now. Get a health check up done at least once in six months. Remember, I will not be there to remind you of all this in the new office”.

He nodded, unable to look into her eyes.

“Most importantly, stop all the mails, Whatsapp and Facebook messaging. It is difficult to do so gradually which is the reason you should stop them right away. We are all adults here, right”

He nodded again.

“Lift your head and look at me”

He obliged.

“Oh my god. Don't you cry now.”

She began to laugh. After a while, he too recovered, wiped his tears and tried to smile.

She had wept when she joined that office, unable to cope with demands of work. Not that she was new to the field. She had worked in the software industry before her marriage. But once she got married, she could not think about a job for seven years. In these years many things had changed. Her earlier familiarity of software industry and her prior experience were of little help. When she sought help in the office, the team leader told her to approach her senior. She had assumed that a senior would be an older man, at least forty five to fifty. He turned out to be younger than her, hardly thirty years old. But he behaved very responsibly. He cleared her doubts and taught her things. Even in the midst of a busy schedule he did not get annoyed. Endearred by this character, she took to calling him ‘Mr. Senior’. He too began to call her Ms. Junior in response. It brought a smile to their faces.

Every day, at eight in the morning they took the cab from different corners of the city to

travel to work. It was a terrible journey that lasted an hour and half. Office was another hell. One could not get up from one's chair and return journey to home was equally tortuous. Even though the air conditioning worked well, one was constantly gasping for fresh air.

When she got terribly bored, she came to say hello to him.

“So, what did your wife cook for lunch today?” she would ask, while settling down near his seat.

“She didn't. She finds it difficult to get up early in the morning because of our young son”

“It is okay. I brought something. Let us share.”

But he was reticent and did not accept her offer.

“Let us go to Subway and eat something”, she offered then.

The Subway outlet was at a short distance from the office. Many of their colleagues went there regularly. They too got into that habit.

Most people have childhood friends. There is nothing new to share with them and one has to fall back to the same old topics. In fact, such friends are even unaware of one's current disposition. Or one had colleagues. But one could not share everything with them. You need to feel safe and secure. Someone has to knock on your door, calling you out.

"Your husband is a nice guy, right?"

"Very nice. Your wife?"

"Oh, she is a goddess."

After some time, the conversation took a different turn.

"You know what, my husband is so prone to bursts of anger"

"I know. My wife is such a nag."

In fact, she discovered what her husband's problem was within the first three nights of marriage. He suffered from performance anxiety. It never left him. To cover it up he behaved in a domineering way during the day. But she couldn't possibly share that with an office friend. So, when he inquired about her husband, she gave a simple answer, "Each one has one's own troubles" and stopped at that.

Not that he didn't understand. His wife, he felt, did not really love him, respect him nor spoke to him lovingly. He often wondered why she did not.

"Yes, you are right", he agreed with her and did not probe further.

The tortuous cab journey now became bearable as they spent it chatting on phone or messaging on Whatsapp. They went to coffee together. She brought an additional box of lunch for him so they ate the lunch together. They went to Subway for a snack and chatted about nothing specific. If he got fever, she got him medicines. If her workload increased, he shared it. Colleagues noticed their special bond but behaved as if they didn't. Male colleagues did not bother her now. Nor did female colleagues show interest in him. Some were quite curious about how deep their bond was but others were not.

"You don't want anything beyond this, right?"

She looked at him.

"I thought I should ask. It didn't seem right not to ask", he murmured.

"No"

That issue never came up again. Now, he had got a better job offer in a bigger company and was about to leave.

She paid the bill. It was dark now. Both of them avoided getting into the office cabs.

"Shall I drop you home?" he asked, unable to stop himself.

"No, I will take the bus home." she replied.

They looked at each other.

"So", he said.

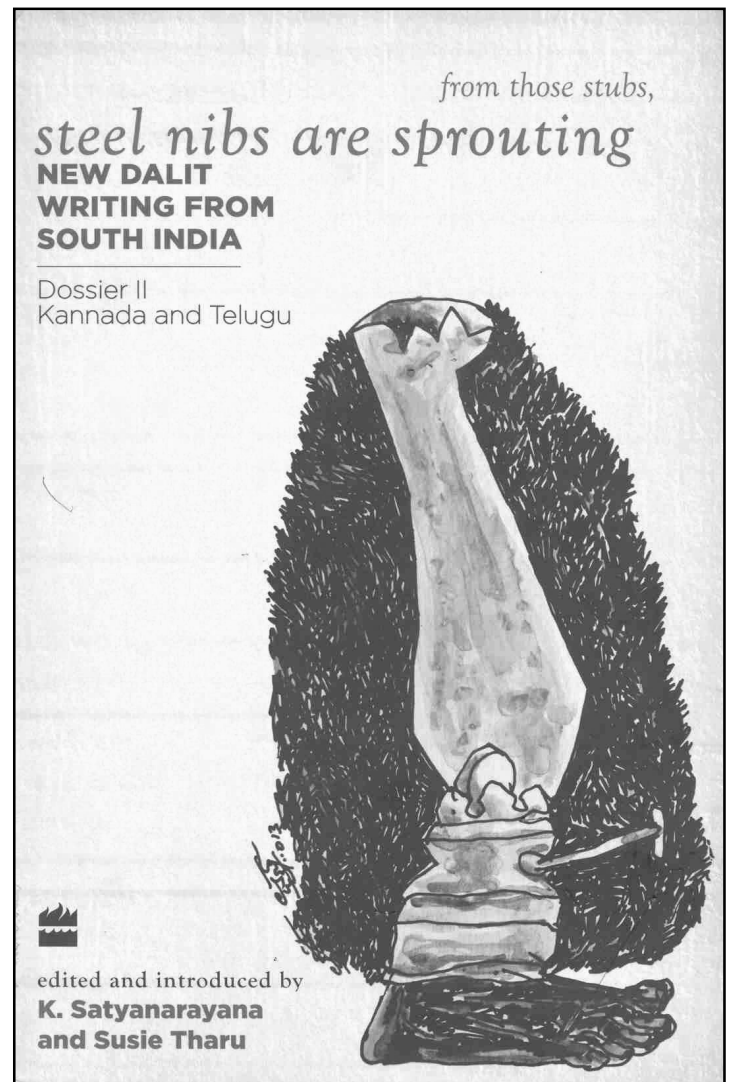
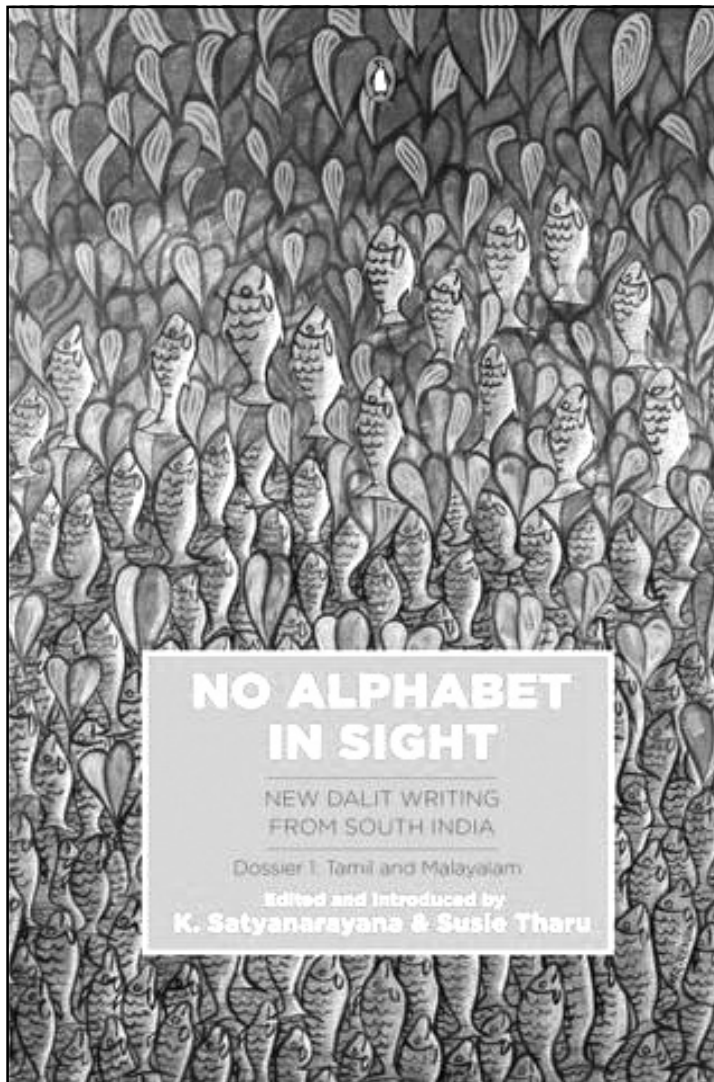
"So", she answered.

She waved her hand. He stretched his and shook hers. It was their last handshake.

Tomorrow would be another day. Office would be open. However, they wouldn't remain the same people. Perhaps others might not remain the same. Subway would continue to serve such people.

This story was taken from Metro Kathalu, Mohammed Khadeer Babu, (2018), Kavali Publications, Hyderabad.

Translated from Telugu by A. Suneetha



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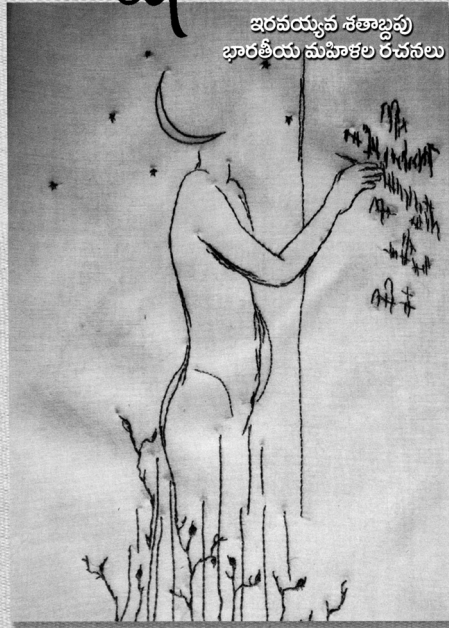
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Anuradhi

వివేక అక్షరాలు



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