

URBAN SPACES IN MODERN INDIA

Edited by
Narayani Gupta • Partho Datta

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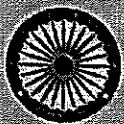
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Heterotopia: Dalits, Citizenship and Urban Spaces


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BHUSHAN AREKAR

INTRODUCTION

The future of humanity lies in cities as most populations across the globe will move towards cities, making it the biggest migration in human history. Cities are considered harbingers of growth – providing opportunities for economic development, social mobility and cultural openness. The process of globalization unleashed three decades ago will remain incomplete without the growth and expansion of cities across the world because the pillars of globalization – finance, technology, capital and labour are embedded in the ecology of the urban landscape. Words like 'globalization', 'flat world', 'networked society', 'death of distance' etc., will remain abstract and empty signifiers unless rooted in the material landscape of cities because it provides the elementary infrastructure for these processes to actualize. India as an emerging power is no exception to this trend of urbanization. The total urban population is currently 31% of the total population, which means that 377 millions are urban dwellers, and the contribution of cities to India's GDP stands around sixty percent. The contribution will touch seventy five percent in the next fifteen years. In the last decade there was an addition of 2,774 towns in India (Urban Growth, GOI).

The monstrous growth in the urban landscape will not be easy as the storming of cities will give rise to a plethora of problems like housing, sanitation, health, education, infrastructure, policing, etc. It should be left to policy makers to decide how to manage this phenomenal urbanization of India. What is interesting is the lack of imaginative ideas of city in the popular discourse of Indian leaders. Even today 'Bharat', representing villages, captures the imagination of the political class, whereas urban India is perceived as the repository of modern values and the ills associated with modernity. In fact, the Constituent Assembly debates on citizenship, democracy and nation were framed on the continuum of the village and the city. Mahatma Gandhi and the Gandhians foresaw India through the idealized village that retained the civilizational identity of Bharat whereas Pandit Nehru and Dr. Ambedkar considered village republic as defunct ideas and bane for the newly born constitutional republic. Dr. Ambedkar had contempt for the romanticized village republic and launched a scathing attack on such notions. No doubt even dalits in India, inspired by him, have turned to cities in search of social progress. How the city as an imaginative idea and real space has encountered the caste system is the object of study in this paper. However, the paper is not looking at an abstract, holistic understanding of caste relations in modern Indian city but will explore the cultural practice of caste in the context of public spaces in the city of Mumbai. The paper will study the event of December 6 - the death anniversary of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar - through the conceptual lens of heterotopias - a concept associated with Foucauldian thought. The paper will first explore Dr. Ambedkar's idea of urbanity and endosmosis. Secondly, it will explain the significance of December 6 for dalits and the spatial practice happening on Shivaji Park, a significant public space in Mumbai. Third, the paper will use the concept

of heterotopia to explain the spatial practices occurring in Shivaji Park. Finally, the paper will consider the notion of citizenship in the context of civil and political society.

DR. AMBEDKAR ON DEMOCRACY AND SPACE

One of the prescriptive ideals of the constitution is the democratization of public space which is essential to create the notion of civic citizenship necessary to break the shackles of the caste system. Dr. Ambedkar as an architect of the Indian constitution was deeply aware of the lack of social democracy in Indian society and saw the role of the constitution in transforming it. The Chapter on fundamental rights contains articles aiming to create secular spaces in the new Republic. Dr. Ambedkar strongly believed that urban spaces like political institutions are vital for realizing the vision of the new republic, as cities provide amenable environment for social endosmosis. In the Constituent Assembly debates, Dr. Ambedkar made scathing criticism of Gandhian notion of village republic by calling it 'a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, [and] narrow-mindedness' (Ambedkar, 1994:353). Further he pointed out the rigid social structure in the villages which made caste system operational wherein territorial spaces are distinctly marked for the upper castes and dalits which reduces the dalits to the peripheries of the villages. In his book, Dr. Ambedkar argued that spatial relations are indispensable in the creation and sustenance of caste system because it is the space that makes the practice of untouchability visible. Untouchability as a field of power-relations not only circulates through the body of untouchables but it also encompasses the space around it. Spatial segregation "is a fundamental feature of Untouchability as it is practised by the Hindus. It is not a case of social separation, a mere stoppage of social intercourse

for a temporary period. It is a case of territorial segregation and of a *cordon sanitaire* putting the impure people inside a barbed wire into a sort of a cage. Every Hindu village has a ghetto. The Hindus live in the village and the Untouchables in the ghetto." (Ambedkar, 1948:31) Social exclusion and spatial segregation co-produce each other, thus making the villages sites of injustice and inequality. Untouchability will continue to exist as long as "the village provides an easy method of marking out and identifying the Untouchables, the Untouchable has no escape from Untouchability. It is the system of the Village plus the Ghetto which perpetuates Untouchability and the Untouchables therefore demand that the nexus should be broken..." (Ambedkar, 1989:423). In Ambedkar's view a democratic society is based on associative mode of living which allows varied and free points of contact, it is a realm that enables social endosmosis (Ambedkar, 1989:5). In sum, Ambedkar argued that it is in urban spaces that the ideals of democracy can be realized.

SIGNIFICANCE OF DECEMBER 6

A large population of dalits has moved to cities in search of social mobility and economic progress and Mumbai being one of the hubs of industrial activity has been a pull factor for the dalits to migrate from their villages. There are several locations in Mumbai that have been largely inhabited by the dalits like B.D.D. chawls in Worli & Dada road, Ramnagar in Ghatkopar, Parvathi in Mazgaon, Siddharth Nagar in Goregaon, Ambedkar Nagar in Khar road, Kasarwadi in Dadas, etc. Similarly, there are several upper caste neighborhoods, like Hindu Colony and Shivaji Park in Dadas, Gurgam, Park East, Mahund East, Sarasvat Colony in Mahim, etc. These neighborhoods indicate meshes of power running through it, and such spatialized power structures which have socio-cultural values inscribed

operate in the mundane lives of the residents, and often run through the public spaces that are within its geographical proximity like parks, playgrounds, gardens, beaches, promenades, etc. However, since these spaces are public in nature, access to them cannot be restricted or denied to the citizens based on social criteria. At the same time, cultural discourse may govern the spatial practices of people in the form of norms once they are in the milieu. Such dominant discourses inscribe meaning to spaces and define their use, function and purposes. Further, the norms, spatial practices of individuals or multitude over a period of time give identity to such places. The spatial practices often generate knowledge about the spaces which can become hegemonic if the spatial practices are based on the cultural norms of the sites. However, if spaces are not enclosures in the strict sense, they remain open to spatial practices of different modes by other social groups who may impose, influence, shape or give other identities to these spaces. The contingent nature of spaces may give rise to confrontations, conflicts and transgression, depending on the differing or contrasting norms, cultural values, knowledge and discourses of the actors who are involved in the spatial practices (Santilli, 2007:173-174). Public spaces often become sites of confrontation in terms of identities and norms due to their openness (partial or total), as different social groups can construct spatial identities on the sites by their spatial play like political rallies, cultural programmes, consumption activities, symbolic movements, etc., making the spaces as non-spaces. In other words, such sites have no intrinsic identities but are so constructed by the interplay of group or individual acts, norms, symbolic values, etc. This does not mean public spaces are neutral, on the contrary, their identities are in a state of flux. This uncertainty of permanent spatial identity resulting from alternating spatial ordering makes the site heterotopia.

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HETEROTOPIA

Heterotopias are places of otherness whose identity is in a state of flux. The term was used by Michel Foucault in his work *Of other spaces*. "There are also, and this probably in all culture, in all civilization, real places, effective places, places that are written into the institution of society itself, and that are a sort of counter-emplacements... (that) are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted; a kind of places that are outside all places, even though they are actually localizable. Since these places are absolutely other than all the emplacements that they reflect, and of which they speak, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias" (Foucault, 2008:17). Foucault cites several examples of heterotopias like mirror, cemetery, cinema halls, garden, museums, libraries, vacation villages, ships, etc. In modern cities some public spaces are heterotopic because it is based on, "a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable." (Foucault, 2008:21) These are sites constituted by their difference in relations to other sites and it is this alternate social orderings that give rise to heterotopias. However, it is not the physical location or a territory which is characterized as heterotopias but the spatial practice resulting into social constitution of different order, norms, ethics and symbols that makes the site appear different when observed from outside. The presence of such places unsettles meanings with the other spaces that surround them. The unsettling of meanings occurs due to incongruous spatial practices which challenges, questions, rejects, modifies etc., existing spatial practices. The incongruous spatial practices give rise to new social orderings that remain ephemeral but disturb the existing practices. The alternate spatial practices are like volcanic eruptions that change the features of the existing landscape

but the change is ephemeral. Foucault contends that social orderings are based on the principle of resemblance and similitude. In resemblance, "the social orderings is in concurrence with the existing or prevalent ethos of the given society. Similitude, however, is all about an ordering that takes place through a juxtaposition of signs that culturally are seen as not going together, either because their relationship is new or because it is unexpected. What is being signified cannot be easily attached to a referent... This similitude can be used to challenge the conventions of representation. This representation may well be all about resisting or transgressing the cultural expectations that go into making up the idea of a social order" (Hetherington, 1997:9). December 6 is one such event that turns Shivaji Park into heterotopia because of the sudden emergence of spatial practices perceived as different, alternate and incongruous.

Shivaji Park is located in the heart of Mumbai flanked by the sea at the west side and surrounded by a posh locality at its eastern front. Some important sites near the park are Savarkar Udyan, Sena Bhavan, Kirti College and a club in the park. Since the park is surrounded by residential areas mostly inhabited by upper caste (class) Hindus, it is part of the extended cultural milieu of the neighborhood. However, it must be noted that several historic and political events have occurred in this park, like a political meeting during the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, the victory rally addressed by Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri after the Indo Pak war of 1965 (*The Deccan Herald*, 27/11/2012), the rally of Dalit Panther in its heyday, the massive dalit rally in order to oppose the Maharashtra government's decision to ban Dr Ambedkar's book 'Riddles on Hinduism' (Dr. Anand Teetumbde, 2012). Similarly, the Shivsena conducts their annual massive political meet known as Dusherra Melawa on 26th January every year, the Republic day parade too is

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held here. Only during December 6 every year, does a totally different social order come into effect on this site. The entire milieu turns blue on this day giving Shivaji Park a different identity.

December 6 is the death anniversary of Dr Ambedkar which is popularly known as Mahaparinirvana Diwas. The Navyana Buddhist attribute Mahaparinirvana to Ambedkar not in some religious but in a social sense as his death signifies cremation of his mortal body and not his immortal ideas which contains the seeds of emancipation. His body was cremated at the Dadar Crematorium. Yeswantrao Chavan, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, gave the nearby land to erect a memorial of Dr. Ambedkar known as Chaitya Bhoomi. On this day, lakhs of dalits come to pay homage to Dr. Ambedkar at the Chaitya Bhoomi (Janak Singh, 2010:344-345). This site is located on the shoreline, and dalit masses used the beach to rest after paying homage to Ambedkar. In the last few decades, the beach has submerged under water and hence the Ambedkarites flock to Shivaji Park where the Mumbai Municipal Corporation provides makeshift arrangements for the masses like food, water, toilets, etc. Since the 1990s, there has been a phenomenal growth in the number of dalits coming to Chaitya Bhoomi due to the second democratic upsurge in the 1990s, Mandal politics and the rise of dalit consciousness in north India by the BSP politics. Overall more than five lakh followers descend at Dadar, a Mumbai suburb where Shivaji Park is located and the roads taking to Shivaji Park are flanked by banners, posters, flags belonging to political parties, scheduled castes & scheduled tribes, unions of public sector undertakings, nongovernmental organizations etc., to paying homage to Dr Ambedkar. Huge police forces are deployed near Shivaji Park to regulate the swelling crowds and traffic including surveillance cameras, to maintain law and order. Generally, the Ambedkarite followers are in white

and blue attire with blue colour mark on their forehead, blue colour badges hooked to their chest as cultural signifier of dalit identity and one hears the slogans of 'Jai Bhim'. Inside the Park several groups of musicians and singers play folk songs in reverence of Dr Ambedkar, others distribute pamphlets to spread his social message. But the eye catching event is the large number of book stalls sprawling across the Shivaji Park. Books ranging from thinkers like Mahatma Phule, Karl Marx, Martin Luther King Jr., Bhagat Singh, Shahu Maharaj, Swami Vivekanand etc., and other books on social, political and ideological themes are for sale in English, Hindi and Marathi language. But most books are about life and ideological message of Dr Ambedkar. Interestingly, just outside the park, the Maharashtra Government Press stall is installed to sell *Ambedkar's Speeches and Writings Volumes* at discounted prices. The overall volume of book sales on 5th and 6th December is more than two lakhs across two hundred stalls and the prime reason behind this is the message of Dr Ambedkar that education is the sole liberator. The increased sale of books is an indication of the spread of literacy among the dalits in India (Hindustan Times 8/12/2012). Since the majority of the crowds come from rural areas several NGOs set up medical check up facilities in the park to cater free services to the masses. What is so significant about the December 6 event and why is there such a surge in the crowd even fifty nine years after the death of Dr. Ambedkar? This event is spontaneous without support or patronage of state, political parties or civil society yet the masses come to Chaitya Bhoomi inspired by a noble vision to create a casteless society (The Hindu 8/12/2006). The growing popularity of Dr Ambedkar is unparalleled in the history of modern India and it is testified by the fact that he is considered the Greatest Indian after Mahatma Gandhi, as per the poll conducted by Outlook magazine (Outlook 20/08/2012).

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How is this alternate social order at Shivaji Park perceived by the local residents? It varies from discomfort to outright revulsion, and reactions of the residents are often camouflaged in the language of civility and morality attributed to their own selves and contrastingly lacking in the dalits coming to Shivaji Park. Anand Patwardhan's documentary 'Jai Bhim Comrade' captures the caste discourse deeply rooted in the minds of the upper caste residents. In this documentary, several residents were interviewed on the occasion of December 6. One local resident is not aware of the contribution of Dr. Ambedkar to Indian society, another resident complains about how tax payers are cross subsidizing the free travel of dalits coming to Shivaji Park by train and bus. The third resident suggested to shift the memorial on the outskirts of Mumbai so as to avoid the inconvenience to the local residents for two days but gave qualifying justification for celebration of Ganesh festival that goes on for eleven days in Mumbai. A lady loathingly called the entire Scheduled Caste community filthy and whose presence can be felt even from a distance. A young college girl sipping coffee at Barista is vocal about her dislike towards the dalits and the reservation policy and another young man blames the dalits for lacking innate merit and using the crutches of reservation policy to gain upward social mobility. One aspect that has been overlooked is the double movement of people during December 6 when many residents prefer to leave Mumbai during this period in order to avoid the commotion and discomfort caused by the presence of dalits. One can see the uneasy silence in the entire locality as the residents prefer to stay indoors with tightly closed windows and doors. In fact, there is not even curiosity among the residents to watch the event from the balcony - participating in the event or paying homage to Dr. Ambedkar is stretching the imagination too far. The simultaneity of self-imposed social enclosure of the locals

and the mobility of the visiting dalits exhibits the hidden tensions of the unequal cultural practice of citizenship in urban landscapes. Cultural citizenship in cities is based on the performative norms whereby individuals enact a specific mode of behavior based on socially recognized values of his social location. Such public performativity is not just constitutive of self identity but gives legitimacy to social groups. (Smith & Davidson, 2008:235) These repetitive and ritualized public behaviors en masse impose the social identity of the group on the spaces where the actions are performed. Except December 6, the upper caste/class spatial norms are mundanely performed on this site, giving it a so called cosmopolitan identity based on cultural and consumption habits of the upper echelons but on December 6 the place is identified with the presence of Dalits and their social values that are not only opposite but hierarchically inferior to the social norms of the neighborhood. It must be pointed out that significant numbers of dalits coming to Shivaji Park have gained social mobility and developed consumption patterns similar to the middle class residents yet the class identity of the dalits are conflated with the caste identity. As majority of the dalits coming to the site belong to villages and are poor, the local residents straight jacket the cultural, regional or economic differences of the masses into a homogenous dalit identity. Such pattern of identification by the local residents of the dalits as backward and uncivil exposes the tension between the civil and the political society.

OF CIVIL AND POLITICAL SOCIETY

In recent times civil society discourse has become fashionable due to its potential for expanding the realm of freedom and autonomy and optimizing the potential for public sphere. In urban milieu we see the proliferation of voluntary groups,

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citizen forums and resident' welfare groups etc., who take up civic issues and are seen as harbingers of civic engagement. Often in the media discourse such initiatives are celebrated for their educative role in developing civic citizenship. Although civil society has its own merits, its celebration as a virtuous realm should not blind us to the exclusionary practices existing in the civil society due to structured power relations. Partha Chatterjee considers civil society as a realm constituted by culturally equipped citizens posing as high priest of modernity and those outside it fall in the domain of political society. People in political society are formal citizens but their rights bearing status is ambiguously related to the state. Such groups like urban and rural poor constantly negotiate with the state agencies for their welfare and rights. The state cannot neglect the political society out of democratic compulsions but also, due to its limited capacity, fails to uplift them in the realm of civil society. Often the members of civil society have grudges against the state for pandering to the needs of political society for electoral gains (Chatterjee, 2004:37-41). This tension between civil and political society is visible on December 6 at Shivaji Park where the residents as culturally equipped members of civil society are scornful of the dalits (belonging to political society), whom they perceive as culturally inferior and survivors in the welfare state. However, the local residents cannot prevent the members from arriving at Shivaji Park but prefer to go into self-exclusion by leaving Mumbai or staying in their homes.

The dalits are able to articulate their cultural identity on this day with a sense of self esteem and dignity. Since the dalits come as a multitude on this day, their cultural presence is evidently visible which may not be the case if they come as individuals on any other day. The alternate order created by the dalits as said earlier, turns Shivaji Park into heterotopias.

It can be argued that such heterotopias are momentary events and lack transformative potential for the dalits in terms of socio-economic development that will enable them to enter civil society. However, a heterotopia may not be the site of bringing social transformation but it does expose the structures of hierarchies, domination and exploitation in society by creating a subaltern counter public space.

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