

# **Dissent and Cultural Resistance in Asia's Cities**

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# 10 Why loiter? Radical possibilities for gendered dissent

*Shilpa Phadke, Shilpa Ranade and Sameera Khan*

I wish to ... just be myself ... not think about who's watching me ... if I want to just sing to my heart's content ... swing about and walk the streets ... laugh ... express myself ... without anybody misconstruing anything I do or say!!!!

I wish I could go to a tea/naan/cigarette stall at any time of day or night and not have only men flock around it and make me feel like I am intruding on their space.

– The Blank Noise project<sup>1</sup>

## Why loiter?

As educated, employed, middle-class, urban Indian women in our thirties, when we express a desire to seek pleasure in the city by loitering it might seem problematic to some. It might seem as though (a) as beneficiaries of the women's movement who have access to education, healthcare and employment, *we are asking for too much*, (b) given that most women in India don't have access to even basic facilities, *we are being frivolous* and (c) our desire to loiter is peculiar, for in any case *loitering itself is an offensive activity*. For loitering, the lack of demonstration of a visible purpose, is usually perceived as a marginal, sometimes downright anti-social, even extra-legal, act of being in public city space.

Yet, we would like to stick our necks out to suggest that not only *do* we desire to loiter, we in fact believe that this act of pleasure-seeking holds the possibility of not just expanding women's access to public space but also of transforming women's relationship with the city and re-envisioning citizenship in more inclusive terms.

Even within the women's movement, the desire for pleasure has never been as legitimate as the struggle against violence. In India, for instance, the contemporary women's movement (1970s onwards) has focused on issues of overt violence against women: rape, dowry deaths, sexual harassment, domestic violence and sati; raising awareness and reforming the law (Agnes 1992, Dave 2006, Kannabiran 2006, Kumar 1993). From our perspective however, the quest for pleasure and the struggle against violence are deeply inter-connected. The quest for pleasure actually strengthens our struggle against violence, framing it in the language of rights rather than protection. The struggle against violence as an end in itself is fundamentally premised on exclusion and can only be maintained through violence, in

that, it tends to divide people into 'us' and 'them', and actually sanctions violence against 'them' in order to protect 'us'. The quest for pleasure on the other hand, when framed in inclusive terms, does not divide people into aggressors and victims and is therefore non-divisive. Furthermore, the right to pleasure by default must encompass the right against violence. This right includes the provision of infrastructure like transport, street lighting, public toilets, and policies that enable more sensitive law enforcement by recognizing people's fundamental right to access public space.

This article draws substantially on insights and findings of the Gender & Space Project (2003–2006) at PUKAR (Partners in Urban Knowledge, Action & Research) on which all three of us collaborated. This research project sought to examine women's access to public space in Mumbai. In the course of our research we spoke to women, individually and in groups, across class, community, profession and geographical divisions; ethnographically studied women's use of public spaces including but not limited to parks, railway stations, and even new spaces of consumption such as malls and coffee shops; graphically mapped the use of public spaces by women; and engaged intensively with students through our pedagogic initiatives.<sup>2</sup> This research demonstrates unequivocally that, despite the fact that in 21st-century global Mumbai certain women are both visible and desirable in the public, particularly in their roles as professionals and consumers, women have only conditional access and not claim to public city spaces. This is true even though Mumbai is unanimously considered the friendliest city for women in the country.

Our research shows that though political and economic visibility has brought increased access to public space, it has not automatically translated into greater *rights* to public space for women. We suggest that concerns regarding safety for women are articulated in a language of exclusion and premised on the elimination of other marginal citizens.

So long as women's presence in public space continues to be framed within the binary of public/private and within the complexly layered hierarchies of class, community and gender, an unconditional right to public space will remain a fantasy. In this article, we make a case for loitering as a fundamental act of claiming public space and ultimately a more inclusive citizenship. For the right to loiter for all, we believe, has the potential to undermine public space hierarchies. Pushing this proposition further, we suggest that loitering is a politics of publicly visible dissent that offers possibilities to envision a radically altered city.

Loitering, we argue, immediately disrupts the post-feminist assumption of equal access to the public. Even as an imagined intervention it upsets the complacency that is often engendered by the visibility of middle-class women in the public sphere especially in education and employment. By doing so it also brings into focus otherwise taken-for-granted limitations to women's access to public space.

Our call for loitering as a strategy of dissent reflects our politics and is founded on our research which enabled us to understand the modalities of gendered spatiality in Mumbai. The position we take on loitering in this article is then primarily a conceptual rather than an empirical one. While our work focuses on Mumbai, our understanding of gendered public space and the transformative

potential of loitering might resonate in the everyday realities and experiences of other globalizing cities in Asia.

### Ordering the global city: The respectable woman and the *tapori*

*"Whoever is found between sunset and sunrise ... laying or loitering in any street, yard or any other place ... and without being able to give a satisfactory account of himself ... shall on conviction, be punished ..."*

– Bombay Police Act, 1951

Contemporary Mumbai is a metropolis of almost 5.5 million women and 6.5 million men.<sup>3</sup> Since the early 1990s, the liberalization of the Indian economy has led to the infusion of capital into the country and Mumbai, India's commercial capital, is at the centre of this development. This has included a shift from a manufacturing to a service economy, tellingly symbolized in the conversion of its historic textile mills to glitzy shopping malls, a process that has systematically marginalized the city's working classes.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, the rise of Hindu right-wing politics has substantially altered what was once a relatively liberal religious environment, a change underscored by the communal riots the city witnessed in 1992–1993.<sup>5</sup> The global 'war on terror' has only exacerbated this process, manifest as it is in a politics of morality and a deep suspicion of those seen not to belong.<sup>6</sup>

Further, globalization and the resultant socio-economic changes have ossified hierarchical divisions in the city to make it not just anti-all-marginal citizens but, more importantly, to make their marginalization more acceptable. Slum demolition drives, the removal of street hawkers and the closure of dance bars are just some examples of this marginalization.<sup>7</sup> This impulse to exclude the poor is also reflected in the spatial geography of the city: in the increasing security, the symbolic high walls of gated communities, and the glass barriers of malls and coffee shops.

As suggested earlier, as Mumbai strives to take its place among the global cities of the world, the presence of women in public space, as professionals and consumers, increasingly signals a desirable modernity. As a result, even if women in general don't have unconditional claim to public space, in the narrative of the global city, women of a particular class and demonstrable respectability have greater legitimacy in public than many men of a lower class.

It is then the most desirable among these women, the urban, young, middle-class, able-bodied, Hindu, upper-caste, heterosexual, married or marriageable woman around whom the narratives of respectability are structured in contemporary India. This woman is the bearer of all moral and cultural values that define the family/community/nation (Bacchetta 2003, Chakravarti 2006, Sarkar 2000). Her virtue, sexual choices and matrimonial alliances are fraught with questions of appropriateness based on the insistence on caste, community and class endogamy. In contrast, lower-class men are looked upon as an undesirable presence in public space. Their lack of legitimacy is underscored by locating them as a potential source of the threat faced by women, as putative perpetrators of sexual harassment

and assault. Interestingly, women themselves internalize these narratives as is apparent from interviews across the city wherein women identified poor men (and Muslim men) as the threat. Women's restricted mobility in public space is often rationalized in relation to the presence of this 'dangerous' 'other'. Lower-class men and middle-class women are then the oppositional figures around whom the discourse of safety, legitimacy and illegitimacy in public space is structured (Phadke 2007). This narrative defines the intersection of class and gender hierarchies in Mumbai.

To foreground this opposition it is interesting to consider the figure of the Mumbai *tapori*, a lower-class vagrant male, the closest counterpart to the Parisian flâneur in the Mumbai context.<sup>8</sup> A *tapori* is usually a youngish lower-class male who spends much of his time hanging out at street corners with others like him. He is often peripherally connected to a neighbourhood politician or don which shores up his bravado as a figure of fear and awe. While occupationally he may be either unemployed or engaged in small-time businesses, his primary identity in action comes from solving the neighbourhood problems, from resolving fights over water to recovering bad loans, using fear or coercion. The *tapori* postures as masculine but often has no real power and can claim little more than his particular street. The presence of the *tapori*, as represented in Bollywood films such as *Rangeela* and *Ghulam*, is about the performance of an attitude.<sup>9</sup> This performance causes many women using public space some anxiety since the presence of the *tapori* leader and his cronies often brings with it cat-calls, comments and loudly sung film songs. A group of young men regularly loitering at a particular street corner or tea stall immediately marks that space as being unsafe for women.

While the explicit fear is the possibility that lower-class men will attack women in public space, implicit is the anxiety that they may form consensual sexual relationships with middle-class women thus violating class, caste and community norms of sexual endogamy.<sup>10</sup> The burden that is carried by both middle-class women and lower-class men in public is that of maintaining an appropriate distance from each other. In this process they enact and reinscribe the status quo of class and gender hierarchies.

The people who have the most access to public space in Mumbai are middle- and upper-class men though they often don't need to, choose not to, are too busy to, or too fastidious to actually *be* in public space.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, it seems that in a context where access to public space is contested, the more legitimacy you have in public spaces the less likely it is that you actually access it. Lower-class men may be able to access public space but are often objects of surveillance. On the other hand, middle-class women despite their ostensible desirability actually have very circumscribed access to public space.

Situating safety for women in opposition to the presence of others has the effect of rendering both, women and other marginal citizens, outsiders to public space (Phadke 2007). So long as lower-class men are cast as the threat, women will never have open access to public space as citizens. A claim to public space (rather than conditional access) can only come when all women and all men can walk the streets, for women's access to public space cannot come at the cost of the exclusion of others.

## The tyranny of purpose: The window-shopper and the street-walker

*'Whoever, in any public place or within sight of, and in such manner as to be seen or heard from, any public place ... by words, gestures, willful exposure of her person ... tempts or endeavours to tempt, or attracts or endeavours to attract the attention of, any person for the purpose of prostitution; or solicits or molests any person, or loiters or acts in such manner as to cause obstruction or annoyance to persons residing nearby or passing by such public place or to offend against public decency, for the purpose of prostitution, shall be punishable on first conviction with imprisonment.'*

– Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, (1988) under the Indian Penal Code

The visible Mumbai woman accesses public space purposefully, she carries large bags, parcels and babies to illustrate her purpose, uses her cell phone as a barrier between herself and the world, and heads unerringly for the ladies compartment of the local train. Women's demeanour in public is almost always full of a sense of purpose; one rarely sees them sitting in a park, standing at a street corner smoking or simply watching the world go by as men might. Our research demonstrates that women's access to public space involves a complex series of strategies involving appropriate clothing, symbolic markers, bulky accessories, and contained body language designed to demonstrate that despite their apparent transgression into public space, they remain respectable women, essentially located in the private.

Manufacturing respectability primarily involves illustrating linkages to familial structures and masculine protection. Women often wear traditional markers and signifiers of matrimony, particularly Hindu matrimony, on their bodies to underscore their connection to private spaces.<sup>12</sup> In fact sometimes unmarried women also wear them in order to appear more respectable. Women are also required to reflect respectability in the contained way in which they hold their bodies such as occupying the least possible space in public transport.<sup>13</sup>

Since education and employment are legitimate reasons to be in public space, women in Mumbai often use their identity as students or workers in order to enhance access to public space. Women also legitimize their presence in public space by exploiting acceptable notions of femininity that connect them to motherhood and religion. In our mapping of a large public playground in the mill-district of Mumbai, for example, we found that the only time women were found 'hanging out' was around the time the school, flanking the playground, ends for the day. These are mothers many of whom come much before school closes to spend some 'official' time in public space with friends.

Similarly, older Hindu women often form *bhajan mandalis* (groups that chant devotional songs) and gather in public parks. The celebration of festivals like Ganeshotsav, Navratri and the month of Ramzan/Ramadan, as also visits to temples sometimes late in the night (such as to Mumbai's famous Siddhi Vinayak Temple), offer women opportunities to access the celebratory public outside of their everyday lives. Some of these women acknowledge meeting friends for dinner before heading out to join the temple queue. These occasions offer spaces for



*Figure 10.1* Waiting at a Mumbai bus stop (photo credit: Poulomi Basu).

momentary subversion and pleasure in the public that might otherwise be denied to them. At the same time, these spaces continue to be circumscribed by the performance of normative femininity.

Woman's fundamental out-of-placeness in public space is maintained through the hegemonic discourse which sets up an opposition between the 'good' private woman and the 'bad' public woman.<sup>14</sup> This binary dominates the perception of all women in public space; being in public without a purpose – that is, loitering – would automatically mark a woman as belonging to the latter category.<sup>15</sup>

There are however two kinds of women in Mumbai who do appear in public space without an apparent purpose; the window-shopper and the street-walker. The former, as consumer, embodies the *raison d'être* of the global city. The latter is there for work, but is not just undesirable but also illegitimate. In reality, neither is there without purpose, for both shopping and sex-work are productive activities.<sup>16</sup> Despite this apparent similarity the two are perceived very differently.

In a consumption-driven economy, shopping is an act that is both respectable and respected. The buyer therefore occupies a very privileged position. In our research on Mumbai we found that the spaces where women, especially middle-class women, are visible are inevitably spaces of consumption: shopping malls, coffee shops, lounge bars, nightclubs and discos. While many women articulate pleasure in these spaces, nonetheless, access to spaces of consumption demands a demonstration of the capacity to buy, and obvious, if unspoken, codes of dress and conduct underwrite women's presence there. Moreover, while most of these spaces masquerade as public spaces, they are actually private spaces. Women's presence in



these spaces thus remains circumscribed and fails to adequately challenge the hegemonic narrative of the public/private binary.

The tyranny of manufacturing purpose then regulates women's access to the public. In our research mapping the paths of women and men in Nariman Point (a business district) in Mumbai, we observed that during lunchtime, most women who come down from their offices to get lunch (relatively few compared to men) go straight to the vendor, pick up their food and head back inside. Men on the other hand will dawdle outside, not only eating at the stalls but often hanging around on the street, before and after eating (Ranade 2007).

Failing in an adequate demonstration of purpose might leave the woman open to conjecture and the assumption that she is soliciting. Ironically, under the provisions of Indian law, sex-work is not illegal, but soliciting in public is, clearly demonstrating the desire for neat public/private boundaries and a conservative morality that would like to keep all sexual activities indoors.<sup>17</sup>

Sex-workers are seen to be engaging in work that is inherently risky and non-respectable and are therefore seen to be outside the purview of protection available to other women. Consider the Abhishek Kasliwal case in March 2006, in Mumbai, when a woman accused Kasliwal, a wealthy businessman, of repeatedly raping her inside his car. The media showed great interest in the case until police investigations suggested that the woman was probably a sex-worker who had been sexually assaulted in the process of selling sex. The tone of the reportage and investigation then changed. Once the victim was cast as a sex-worker she was seen unworthy of protection from a violent sexual assault and merited little media and police attention.

The public woman is not so much directly a threat to 'good' women as much as a warning to them of the consequences of violating the rules, namely, if they break the rules, they are no longer deemed worthy of 'protection' from society. In fact, society is perceived to be in need of protection from the risk of the contamination that sex-workers present (Phadke 2005).

The main cause for the anxiety posed by the presence of sex-workers in public space is the potential for confusion in distinguishing the respectable women from the unrespectable. To offer an example of how this plays out, in May 2006, the local police in an up-market suburb of north-western Mumbai alleged that they had received complaints that women sex-workers were conducting 'business' by fixing up clients in the open seating spaces outside some popular neighbourhood coffee shops. As a result, the police prohibited the coffee shops from serving customers in the open yards outside their restaurants. Women patrons, in particular, were discouraged from sitting out. The connotation was clear: we are not sure which women are soliciting in such spaces and defiling them, so we shall ban all women from using these spaces.

All women are compelled to carry the burden of this anxiety when accessing public space. In using the demonstration of respectability as a strategy to access public space, women are not only circumscribed by the discourse of the public/private binary but go on to reinscribe it. For all women to be able to access public space unconditionally, we first need to dismantle the discourse of respectability.

The right to public space (rather than conditional access) can only come when all women can walk the streets without being compelled to demonstrate purpose or respectability, without being categorized into public or private women.<sup>18</sup> What would change if women preferred to exercise a right to public space rather than demand provisional access, or demanded pleasure without rationale or access without boundaries, or chose to loiter?

### **Loitering: Pleasure without purpose?**

*As we collectively produce our cities, so we collectively produce ourselves. ... [If] we accept that 'society is made and imagined', then we can also believe that it can be 'remade and reimaged'.*

– Harvey (2000, p 159)

When one thinks of people loitering in Mumbai, the image it conjures up is of messy, difficult to navigate street corners, the smell of low-cost tobacco, the sight of *paan* (betel nut) stains, the sound of boiling tea and unmodulated male voices. Etched into our imaginations is the vision of the unwashed male masses huddled together, unmistakably lower-class in attire and demeanour. Underlying this image is deep class prejudice.

Like the *tapori*, *lukkha*, *lafanga*, *vella*, *bekaar* are other Indian terms used to describe a kind of purposelessness akin to loitering. They are all uncomplimentary terms suggesting not just the lack of employment but also the unease that the loiterer is potentially up to no good. Loitering then, as suggested in our discussion of the Mumbai *tapori*, is read as a suspicious performance of non-productivity. Women are not even in the reckoning since the assumption is that 'even good men don't loiter'.

Our intention in this chapter is to rethink the meanings implicit in loitering and to recast it not as an act of loss of choice but in fact as the very opposite, as an act of agency and desire. When we say loitering we mean not doing anything that has an apparent purpose, or as the dictionary definition suggests, 'to linger aimlessly'. Loitering unlike *flânerie* or *tapori-giri* is not attached to an identity. Its engagement with the city is not voyeuristic but rather organic and visceral for unlike voyeurism loitering implicates the loiterer as actor rather than surveyor. Loitering is an act one can indulge in without professing allegiance to any particular group, morality or ideology. It is a process that is temporally present. You are a loiterer only while you are loitering.

Loitering is fundamentally a voluntary act undertaken for pure self-gratification; it's not forced and has no visible productivity. Loitering can have no purpose other than pleasure. Pleasure which is not linked to consumption has the power to challenge the unspoken notion that only those who can afford it are entitled to pleasure, thus ensuring that marginal citizens are kept in their place. The possibility of a pleasure that does not cost anything and at the same time brings the 'undesirables' out into the streets making them visible, threatens to undermine established notions of urban social order.



Figure 10.2 Hanging out at Marine Drive, Mumbai (photo credit: Poulomi Basu).

This idea of apparent urban anarchy might be threatening to the maintenance of the status quo but for women it represents the possibility of redefining the terms of their access to public space, not as clients seeking protection but as citizens claiming their rights.

Imagine varied street corners full of women sitting around talking, strolling, feeding children, exchanging recipes and books or planning the neighbourhood festival. Imagine street corners full of young women watching the world go by as they sip tea and discuss politics, soap operas and the latest financial budget. Imagine street corners full of older women contemplating the state of the world and reminiscing about their lives. Imagine street corners full of female domestic workers planning their next strike for a raise in minimum wage. *If one can imagine all of this, one can imagine a radically altered city.*

We articulate four propositions to suggest exactly how loitering might succeed where other strategies fail, in creating a more inclusive city.

*1. Loitering holds the possibilities of disrupting the everyday performances of normative respectable femininity in public space through which an oppressive gender-space formation is maintained.*

To fully recognize the extent of these possibilities, it is essential to view gendered space as a constant *process of becoming*; gender as something we *do* rather than something we *are* (Ainley 1998). In doing so, we draw on the conception of gender as being a 'regulatory fiction' in society (Butler 1990) and space as being a

social practice (Lefebvre 1991); both, in effect, being discursive formations or 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972). When we see hegemonic gender-space as something that is not just contested but also constantly being *brought into being* through the everyday actions of men and women in space, rather than something women are *subjected to* by external totalitarian forces, it allows us to imagine possibilities of interrupting and opening up gaps in the relentless replication of unequal gender formations; gaps within which we can re-imagine a rightful place for women in the city.

One might therefore propose loitering as an act that has the possibility to allow the subject to renegotiate sedimented roles, to contest societal and personal expectations, and to enable interventions that fulfil and subvert definitional 'practices' of being. In this context, then, the errant, arbitrary, circuitous routes of the loiterer mark out a kinetic map of pleasure.

In the dialectical relationship between social structure and space, it is the body that becomes the medium through which socio-spatial formations are not just experienced, but produced, reproduced, represented and transformed. Bodies that challenge hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity, or transgress the boundaries of appropriateness, pose a threat to the 'normalized' social order. Many lesbian women in our discussions articulated that when they chose to dress in less feminine, more 'butch' attire, they encountered hostility – ranging from staring to loud comments and occasionally attempts to physically evict them – mostly in all women spaces like the ladies compartments of trains and women's toilets.

In a relative sense the female body, located 'properly' in the private space of the home, has the greatest potential to disrupt the structures of power in public space. The bubble of private respectability that women are expected to cloak themselves in cannot withstand the act of loitering because the two are based on contradictory imperatives – the former, one of maintaining privacy even in the public and the latter, that of taking pleasure in the public for its own sake. The presence of the loitering female body can then challenge the hegemonic discourse of gendered public space by reconstructing the connotative chains of association that connect loitering, respectability and normative femininity. This has the capacity to create a new set of relationships within and with public space through the ensemble of practices associated with women; relationships, which have the power to not just disrupt the dominant order in public space but to have a more long-term impact on how space itself is visualized.

The subversive potential of a visceral and 'subjective' engagement with the city has been explored by social thinkers starting from the second half of the twentieth century, ostensibly in reaction to the totalitarian master narratives that characterized the early part of the century. The potential in loitering might be visualized as an extension of the power of walking itself so eloquently imagined by de Certeau (1984) whose vision of walking as being simultaneously an organic act of belonging and a subversive engagement with the city informs our idea of loitering. For de Certeau, as people walk they reinscribe the city again and again, often in defiance of established patterns of urban order, each time differently making new meanings. Walking, according to him, is fundamentally an act of 'enunciation' through which

the city, and in effect, social order is personalized, and in the process, altered.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Scalway (2001) suggests that walking, which is an act of negotiation when it incorporates regard for the 'other', creates the possibility of meaningful citizenship right there on the streets.

In a variety of languages the terms used for transgressive women in public space are related to the act of being on the streets without purpose – strolling, roaming, wandering, straying, rambling – all terms that Solnit (2000) points out suggest that women's travel is invariably sexual or that their sexuality is inevitably transgressive when it travels.<sup>20</sup> Since it is street-walking – and the need to draw boundaries, to banish the ambiguities between street-walkers and women walking the street – that is the greatest source of anxiety in relation to public space, loitering in public space, not as respectable virtuous women but as citizens, transforms the very nature of engagement making the case that both the woman in the street and the street-walker are making exactly the same claim to space.

It is precisely because loitering is an embodied practice that seeks to transform the everyday acts of walking and looking in the city from acts that are means to an end to acts that are meaningful in themselves, that loitering becomes a compelling tool for change, allowing us to re-imagine the gendered experience of city spaces.

*2. Loitering encompasses a politics of visibility that is different from the subterfuges that women engage in to access the city anonymously.*

Women have often sought to access the pleasures of public city spaces by slipping into the city, merging with the crowd and not drawing attention to themselves. Scholars such as Wilson (1991) and Young (1995) suggest that large cities offer women some access to public space through anonymity.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, this brings with it only temporary and invisibilized access. Wilson also points out that, within the heterosexual discourse, the male gaze is focused largely on young and therefore sexually desirable women. It is women who are old or eschew the 'masquerade of womanliness' who could potentially become invisible, an act that brings a 'kind of negative freedom; but also a kind of social extinction' (2001: 93). Garber (2000) also underscores the limitations of the liberating potential of anonymity, arguing that even for women, whose sexed identity is often obviously visible, the capacity to claim space rests on political organization and the ability to make the transition from invisibility to identity. For although in the short term, anonymity may be the obvious choice for women to enhance access to public space, the potential longer term risk of seeking anonymity could well mean the loss of substantive freedom and eventually a kind of political death wherein women forever remain outsiders to public space (Phadke 2005).

Expanding access through anonymity is not the same as staking a claim as citizens and will not in any way change women's location in or relationship to public space. Loitering, on the other hand, might often be unobtrusive but it is far from invisible. This means that the loiterer might sometimes merge into a crowd and at other times stand out. The loiterer is often unidentified but not anonymous. In fact, by the very

act of doing nothing in public space, the loiterer demands identification. Loitering then has the potential to challenge gendered restrictions of access to public space by its very visibility.

*3. Loitering has the capacity to challenge the new global order of the city by compelling an engagement with the idea that the right to public spaces is a core component of citizenship.*

Urban scholars studying cities across the industrial and developing world have argued that people's access to public space and its resources reflects various hierarchies and patterns of discrimination. Access to public space is often sacrificed at the altar of safeguarding 'law and order'. Safety and order are prized in the new global city, and both are presented as the antithesis of what is embodied, literally and metaphorically, by the poor: their slums are unsanitary, their homes makeshift, their bodies unhygienic, and their very existence a source of threat not just to the middle classes but to the city itself. However, as historical evidence shows, attempts to cleanse and sanitize cities have often had the opposite effect of making cities even more fraught, violent and unsafe (Appadurai 2000, Davis 1990, 1992, Mitchell 2003).

The global claims of Mumbai are still new and fragile and therefore to be guarded zealously. One of the ways these claims can be buttressed is by clear definition of spaces as being inside–outside; public–private; recreational–commercial.<sup>22</sup> Loitering disrupts this imagined order of the global city. The act of loitering, in its very lack of structure, renders a space simultaneously inside and outside; public and private; recreational and commercial, rendering it in a constant state of liminality or transition. We submit that it is precisely this ambiguity that makes loitering potentially liberating. The very power of the liminal state lies in its lack of definition, in its defiance of being named. Loitering mocks the authority of any one group of people to determine the future of the city by speaking with visceral bodies and through the indeterminate nature of the identity of the loiterer.

The presence of the loiterer acts to rupture the controlled socio-cultural order of the global city by refusing to conform to desired forms of movement and location, instead creating alternate maps of movement, and thus new kinds of everyday interaction. It thwarts the desire for clean lines and structured spaces by inserting the ostensibly private into the obviously public. The liminality of loitering is seen as an act of contamination, defiling space. Loitering is a reminder of what is perceived as the lowest common denominator of the local and thus is a threat to the desired image of a global city: sanitized, glamorous and homogenous. Loitering then as a subversive activity has the potential to raise questions not just of 'desirable image' but also of citizenship: Who owns the city? Who can access city public spaces as a right?

In a time when the performance of a consumerist hyper-productivity is becoming deeply significant in global-aspirational Mumbai, the *choice* to demonstrate non-productivity can be profoundly unsettling. Loitering is a threat to the global order

of production in that people are visibly doing nothing. It disrupts the image of the desirable productive body – taut, vigorous, purposeful – moving precisely towards the ‘greater global good’.

Loitering is also a threat to the desired visibility of capitalist consumption in that there is no recognizable product; if a beverage is being consumed it is likely to be unbranded roadside *cutting chai* (three-quarter-cup tea). Loitering, in its defiant demonstration of lack of purpose, immediately refutes the possibility of being co-opted within global practices of consumerist inclusion.

4. Finally, loitering makes possible the dream of an inclusive citizenship by disrupting existent hierarchies and refusing to view the claims of one group against the claims of another.

Young (1995) suggests that the ideal of city life is not communities, for communities by their very nature are exclusive, but a vision of social relations as affirming group difference which would allow for different groups to dwell together in the city without forming a community. She argues that reactions to city life that call for local, decentralized, autonomous communities reproduce the problems of exclusion. Instead, Young imagines a city life premised on difference that allows groups and individuals to overlap without becoming homogenous.

The kind of exclusion that Young suggests is seen clearly in the local citizens’ groups in Mumbai which are often founded on a corporate vision for the city built around zoning, segregation and finally exclusion.<sup>23</sup>

Building on Young’s ideas, we would like to propose that the act of loitering has the potential to make such a vision of diverse city life possible. Our understanding of loitering in public space is based on the right of each individual, irrespective of their group affiliations, to take pleasure in the city as an act of claim and belonging. This is, however, not a notion that is located in a crude understanding of capitalism where each individual maximizes her pleasure in the city leading to the greater pleasure of society. Loitering is an act that could be solitary or in groups. At no point do we perceive the individual as divorced from her multiple locations and identities.

When we ask to loiter then, the intent is to rehabilitate this act of hanging out without purpose not just for women, but for all marginal groups. The celebration of loitering envisages an inclusive city where people have a right to city public spaces, creating the possibility for all to stake a claim not just to the property they own, nor to use the ownership of property as grounds for being more equal citizens, but to claim undifferentiated rights to public space.

This is the potential we see when we seek to reclaim the act of loitering as an act of the most basic citizenship. Here, we not only see citizenship as being linked to cities rather than nations (Holston and Appadurai 1996) but also understand it, not as an *a priori* position sanctioned by the state or collective agreement, but as a space to

be claimed through performance (Donald 1999).<sup>24</sup> So when we ask to loiter then, we see loitering as a performance with the capacity to enable a subjectivity that can claim the position of a 'legitimate citizen'. This enactment of citizenship through loitering is further premised on the quest for pleasure, which, as suggested earlier, has the potential of being both non-divisive and inclusive.

It is only when the city belongs to everyone that it can ever belong to all women. The unconditional claim to public space will only be possible when all women and all men can walk the streets without being compelled to demonstrate purpose or respectability, for women's access to public space is fundamentally linked to the access of all citizens. Equally crucially, we feel the litmus test of this right to public space is the right to loiter, especially for women across classes. Loiter without purpose and meaning. Loiter without being asked what time of the day it was, why we were there, what we were wearing and whom we were with.

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### Notes

- 1 Responses to the online blog campaign 'I Wish, I Want, I Believe' (February 2007) run by the Blank Noise project, which campaigns against sexual harassment on Indian streets. See <http://blanknoiseproject.blogspot.com/2007/02/wish-list.html>
- 2 For detailed arguments and information see Phadke, Khan and Ranade (2006), Khan 2007, Phadke 2007, Ranade 2007.
- 3 The population of the city, which is under the jurisdiction of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, is 11.9 million (Census of India, 2001, [www.censusindia.net](http://www.censusindia.net)). For a discussion on Mumbai's history see Dossal 1991, Dwivedi and Mehrotra 1995.
- 4 For more on the debate surrounding the closure of the textile mills in Mumbai, see Chandavarkar 2004, D'Monte 2002, Menon and Adarkar 2004.
- 5 For a discussion on the impact of these riots on Mumbai, see Appadurai 2000, Chandavarkar 2004, Hansen 2001, Masselos 1994, Robinson 2005 and others. For an account of how the vilification of Muslims impacts Muslim women's access to public space, see Khan 2007.
- 6 The latest group seen to not belong to Mumbai are the North Indians. In February 2008, Raj Thackeray, leader of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), launched a particularly virulent attack on the city's North Indian population with physical attacks on North Indian taxi drivers and their cabs. These attacks continued for several days in Mumbai and also spread to other towns in Maharashtra. In April 2008, Raj Thackeray asked industrialists in Maharashtra to reserve 80 per cent of jobs in their factories and offices for *bhoomiputras* or sons of the soil. Earlier in January 2008, Shiv Sena leader Bal



- Thackeray in a long interview to his party's newspaper, *Saamna*, had also raised the issue of a 'permit system' for all outsiders to live and work in Mumbai.
- 7 For slum demolitions, see Burra 2005, Srivastava *et al.* 2004; for the hawkers question in Mumbai see Anjaria 2006, Bhowmik 2003; for dance bars see Agnes 2006.
  - 8 For more on flânerie see for instance Benjamin 1999, Wilson 2001, Donald 1999, Massey 1994, Wolff 1985.
  - 9 See for instance Ranjani Mazumdar's (2006) engagement with the figure of the *tapori* in Bollywood cinema.
  - 10 The fear of inter-caste and inter-religious relationships and marriages is so acute that violence is often an end result. Couples daring to cross these boundaries are hounded, harassed and even killed. In April 2007, a young Hindu-Muslim couple (Priyanka Wadhvani and Mohammed Umer) created a furore when they fled from Bhopal to Mumbai seeking police protection after marriage. Not only their families but the larger community were up in arms. A new group called the Hindu Kanya Bachao Samiti (Save Hindu Girls Front) organized protests and threatened to lynch the couple if they returned home. The local Sindhi Panchayat came out with a code of conduct for Sindhi girls (Priyanka was Sindhi) including a list of instructions for parents to 'keep their daughters in check' such as curbing their use of mobile phones and two-wheelers. There is also the more recent case of Hindu-Muslim couple Priyanka Todi and Rizwanur Rahman. Rahman's dead body was found beside the Patipukur railway tracks in Kolkata on September 21, 2007. Todi's wealthy father has been booked as the prime accused in the case for allegedly organizing the killing of his lower-middle class Muslim son-in-law.
  - 11 The leisure to 'hang-out', among the middle and upper classes, once considered a sign of prosperity, is increasingly seen as unproductive, even anti-social. See Chakrabarty (1999) for a discussion of one such disappearing practice, the *adda* in Calcutta.
  - 12 These symbols of matrimony include the *mangalsutra*, *sindhoor* and *chooda*, all meant to be worn by Indian Hindu women with some regional variations across the country. *Sindhoor* is the red vermilion powder smeared in the parting of one's hair, *mangalsutra* is the necklace of black and gold beads, and *chooda* refers to the red and white bangles worn on the arms.
  - 13 For a discussion on the containment of women's bodies, see Bartky 1990, Butler 1990, Young 1990.
  - 14 For more on the public/private women debate see Mitchell 2000, Rose 1993, Walkowitz 1992, Wilson 1991, 2001.
  - 15 The control of the presence of 'respectable' women in public space is written into the law through a time regulation in the Factories Act of 1948 in India, which made it illegal for women to be employed/work between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m. As recently as 2003, the government proposed an amendment to this Act which would provide flexibility in the employment of women during night-shifts. This was done largely in response to the needs of new globally linked businesses like the software industry and call-centres.
  - 16 For a discussion of women and consumption, see Friedberg 1993, Domosh and Seager 2001, McRobbie 1997, Morris 2000, Wilson 2001, Wolff 1985. For a discussion of sex-work and its implications for public space, see Nord 1995, Walkowitz 1992, Wilson 1991.
  - 17 This is visible even when couples in public space are booked for obscene behaviour and fined. There has been a visible increase in the policing of couples in parks and on promenades in Mumbai. Couples are often censured for holding hands, and ostensibly threatening the moral fibre of Indian society. Some years ago in the Five Gardens area of Dadar, all park benches were made into single-seaters by the local corporation to discourage couples from engaging in what he termed as 'indecent behaviour'.
  - 18 We are well aware of the limitations of using the discourse of rights when we make a case for loitering. The feminist critique of rights as being individualistic, reifying liberalism and often reflecting existing hierarchies of all kinds and thus limiting the terms of the debate, is both valid and valuable. At the same time, the language of rights is also a

- powerful tool to promote greater inclusion in quest of a more egalitarian citizenship. In this article, we use the terminology of rights largely because of the absence of another way of expressing the entitlement of people to loiter. The language of rights, because of its widespread acceptance, offers a space, however inadequate, to make this claim.
- 19 Besides de Certeau, ideas of the Situationist Internationale (SI) continue to influence attempts to re-personalize the practice of urbanism.
  - 20 While conducting a pedagogic exercise on where women would 'wait' for a friend on the street we find that most women sought the legitimacy of bus-stops where they might pretend to be commuters, for *waiting*, particularly at street corners, was an act synonymous with soliciting.
  - 21 When we say anonymity here we refer to spatial and social elements of large and populous cities that allow for people to remain strangers to each other. For instance, some women in Baiganwadi, a slum in North-east Mumbai, pointed out that their own street was both a familiar and safe space but they still had to behave themselves. The road outside the slum was an intermediate space where they might be recognized, a space many of them described as threatening. Further beyond in the city was the space where they were anonymous, where they often felt the greatest degree of freedom. While anonymity does allow them to be in public space it does little to address the fact that each time they or women elsewhere in the city go out, particularly at night, the masquerade has to begin anew. Furthermore, for women, being intimately part of a homogenous community group often results in greater surveillance and restriction of their movements (Khan 2007, Phadke 2007). Our research suggests that women living in neighbourhoods peopled by their own communities often felt the most restricted while those women who were individual migrants from other towns and cities felt the greatest degree of freedom. This is interesting considering that women living on their own in the city have the least access to support structures that would enable them to produce safety for themselves.
  - 22 The lack of modernist planning in Mumbai, where residential and commercial spaces are mixed, has been an important factor in making public spaces in the city more accessible to women. Our mapping of spaces demonstrated clearly that the number of women in one of the city's few business districts, Nariman Point, drops substantially before and after work hours as compared to other mixed-use areas like Chembur and Kalachowki.
  - 23 In an attempt to cleanse and beautify city neighbourhoods and control local open spaces, middle-class residents groups have sprung up all over Mumbai. In many cases these are known as Advanced Locality Management or ALMs, which is a concept of citizen's involvement with local governance. These often tend to focus on 'beautifying' their neighbourhoods by getting rid of hawkers or slum encroachments.
  - 24 Donald (1999) argues that the question of personhood is central to the definition of citizenship, and this personhood being historically contingent, citizenship is in perennial deferral. Being a citizen, then is not the occupation of a universal or institutionalized position but is a performance.

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