

The struggle to belong

Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings

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Distinctly Delhi: Affect and Exclusion in a Crowded City

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There is a growing body of research describing the embodied experience of cities (see for example, Rose et al, 2010, Jiron 2008, Montserrat Degen 2008, Watson 2005, Wise 2005) and despite the slippery task of finding consensus on terminology and definition, and the philosophical density of debates (see Pile 2010, Anderson 2009, Amin 2008, Gunew 2007, Terada 2001), this work is further elaborating an urban geography of affect, as residents of cities embody their own maps marking out routes of familiarity and avoidance, spaces of comfort and exclusion.

However, to date little of this work has paid attention to cities in the Global South. So the first aim of this presentation, is to place an examination of affect and distinction in Delhi as part of the project to 'post-colonialise knowledge production' (Robinson, forthcoming), and to think through cities as they are constructed and reconstructed in specific place-based processes and experiences.

Secondly, I would like to argue that affective accounts of urban space argue for a reflexive, habitual relationship between inhabitants and the city. However, there has been a tendency to neglect the role of the subjective and the cultural in this relationship. Examining the plurality of cities and the interactions that give shape to urban life allows an exploration of not only the multiple, affective capacities generated in different city-scapes, but the underlying frameworks that enable their circulation, that is, accumulated cultural knowledge.

This focus on a cultural framework in the analysis of affect aims to reclaim some room for the role of subjectivity in the theorising of affect; putting flesh on arguments that affective responses stem from 'pre-cognitive templates' or 'tacit, neurological and sensory knowing' (Amin 2008: 11). Rather than affective experience occurring 'beyond, around and alongside the formation of subjectivity' (Anderson 2009: 77), I would suggest that it is at the very heart of it.

This presentation will concentrate in particular on the role of affect in demarcating difference in a rapidly transforming, 'globalising' city where

previously held cultural knowledge is challenged by the creation of new spaces and the circulation of new demands. Communal, class and gendered boundaries are maintained and reasserted in affective responses to others that delineate distinction often based on judgements of civil and uncivil behaviour, that is, 'appropriate' comportment, movement, noise, smells and contact that generate comfort and predictability. These responses assert what and who is, and is not, permissible within Delhi's public spaces.

The study involved twenty three young people, from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, 15 to 23 years old, using diaries, photographs and maps to document their movement through Delhi. Many of their everyday experiences of the city's noise, crowds, and perceptions of disorder, to things, including themselves, at times being out of place, were described in terms of embodied responses of both pleasure and discomfort, disgust and avoidance, association and adjustment.

Another participant in the study was the city of Delhi itself, rapidly being 'gentrified' through state intervention, and the ubiquitous public/private partnership. New infrastructure is built while other sites are designated as 'illegal' and the city is fragmented into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' localities (Butcher 2009). Remodelling the built environment has seen pre-eminence given to an aesthetics of an imagined cosmopolitan 'global' city that overlays its new condominiums, shopping malls, public transport systems and green spaces (see Brosius 2008). Distinctions are transposed onto this new infrastructure as boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are drawn and there is the physical removal of those that do not fit within Delhi's 2021 Master Plan for urban development (see DuPont's 2008 overview of slum clearances).

The construction and encoding of these boundaries is carried out not only by hegemonies of structural power centred on city authorities, but also by affective boundaries deployed and maintained through subjective understandings of belonging and space use by city inhabitants. As the city is demolished and rebuilt, inhabitants are re-directed, evicted and re-housed along with their understanding of whom and what is and is not permissible within shifting public space. These boundaries are imbued with a sense of distinction and collective identity, expressed through affective markers such

as 'civility', manners, the appropriate means to move through the city and behave in particular spaces.

Civility then becomes a representation of a particular form of urban space, and a means of ordering the city, as breaches encountered in interactions with urban others generate affective responses such as disgust that reinforce distinction (for example, see Herbert 2008; Wise 2005; Zukin 2003). Phillips and Smith (2006), however, argue that incivility is also registered when the flow of the city is impeded, suggesting that it is movement and, importantly, expected, predictable behaviours that circumscribe comfortable, familiar spaces of belonging. This ability to flow through the city also stems from the cultural knowledge needed to avoid unpredictability; to avoid unsettling, insecure, ambiguity; to avoid collisions. People who appear 'out of place' or 'spatially untethered', violate the shared norms that produce predictable behaviour' (Herbert 2008: 659-660). To be 'spatially untethered' is also to be untethered from the cultural practices and knowledge that create that space.

The out of place 'other', block the flow of the city in both their spatial and symbolic transgressions (Anjaria 2009: 396). They do not conform to a sense of order demarcated in the correct use of space and the understanding of boundaries between public/private, moral/immoral, clean/dirty, in a city seeking 'modern', global, status. The resulting anxiety creates what Sibley (1995) has referred to as the attempt to 'purify' space by establishing clear boundaries and internal order based on dominant cultural values and practices. These territorial lines are made legible through 'collectively held ideas of the spaces where they occur' (Herbert 2008: 661-2).

The emphasis on the desire for predictability takes on a particular salience when placed in the context of a rapidly changing city. Normal reflexes, based on knowing which way someone is more likely to move, the direction of traffic, the codes of expected civility in a particular space, no longer always apply. In a city such as Delhi where public spaces often have multiple uses, including dwelling, social and commercial ones, contestation over space use can become decidedly uncivil as seen in the following examples of communal, class and gendered distinctions.

Communal Distinctions

Beginning with the communal. Balbir showed me a photograph of a mosque he travels past each day. He is a university student from a low income south Indian Hindu family, living in a *basti* area behind one of Delhi's most exclusive neighbourhoods.

Balbir: This is not telling that you don't come here but emotionally ... Muslims only go to that [place] (...). It's not written restrictions but it is a restriction to the other peoples.

MB: But would it be the same for your temple also?

Balbir: Yes, [around the] temple there is also restrictions.

He described the unwritten regulations of, in this instance, communal belonging and exclusion, articulated by the senses, and 'felt' within the body; circumscribing sensual boundaries of discomfort. Sight, smell, noise, touch and taste in both the physical and Bourdieuan sense of distinction, marked out for these young people spaces of civility and incivility, spaces where they felt comfortable and where they belonged.

Incivility appeared to be most correlated with particular crowds and their associated dirt, noise and smells. Smell delineated the clean and unclean, including people. The uncivil crowd was often equated with disorder and class distinction, embodying the ambiguity and unpredictability of difference. Oditi, a Bengali Hindu, describes *Chandni Chowk*, the main market area of Old Delhi, as her least favourite place: 'It's just so congested, it's dirty and it's like an overwhelming Muslim culture that's there. Maybe I haven't grown up like that so that's one of the reasons'. There are specific sensory indications for Oditi of this area's difference: its 'layout', the 'kind of people', and 'the lifestyle of the people who reside there'. It is dominated by *Jama Masjid* (the main mosque), and the smells and sight of meat, raw and cooking, all indicate that this is not her place.

She links the need to 'grow up' in a place, that is, to accumulate knowledge, to acquire a level of familiarity, and with it, the comfort that comes from knowing the rules. Shveta, a high school student from an upper income family living in north Delhi, has visited *Chandni Chowk* several times and has

'gotten quite used to the busy, dusty and dirty ambience'. Like Oditi, she demarcates the area as different, but does so on the basis of class distinction. 'It is mostly visited by the lower strata of society in Delhi. The market area is very congested and the lanes are very narrow. I saw how in crowded areas there is a difference in an individual's personal space from a more open area. In *Chandni Chowk* everyone was pushing.'

Socio-economic Distinctions

Civility, 'manners', has become a discourse of a global 'middle class' making new claims on how city space is to be used (see Anjaria's 2009 study on Mumbai; also Fyfe et.al. 2006). According to Patel (2009: 470), the middle class sponsor globalisation and neo-liberal policies of redevelopment 'if only to maintain their social and spatial distance from the "other"'. The 'other', recognised through sensual appropriation (Tyler 2006) represent a form of pollution and must be kept apart, a phenomenon not isolated to 'Third World' countries such as India (see Lawlor 2005, Skeggs 2005 and Tyler 2006 for their work on 'chavs' and the construction of a middle class identity in Britain).

Leena and her friends, Jaya and Shveta, all from upper income families and living in wealthier enclaves, explicitly delineate class in their distinction between civil and uncivil crowds at two very different shopping precincts: the public markets of Sarojini Nagar [Figure X.3] and the new mega-malls opening in the wealthier southern suburbs of Delhi. The malls are some of their favourite places. Jaya notes that people go to the mall now who are 'not from a higher class' but that they probably wont end up buying much. The inability to shop, to consume, is a key point of difference between these young women and the 'lower classes' that use the new malls. They are perhaps representative of Anjaria's (2009) 'citizen-consumer' although should not be reduced to a single category. They echo Herbert's (2008: 661-2) argument that 'exclusion is a spatial practice in more ways than one - not solely a manifestation of spatialised power but a re-inscription of spatialised distinctions'. For Leena, in her favourite mall, Select City Walk (SCW, see IMAGE), she can 'see a lot of like-minded people there' that she can 'connect with'. Leena judges her ability to do this by observing what they buy, for example, demonstrating the same taste in clothes. It is also 'quiet'. She notes

that people of a 'different class' that come to the mall make 'less noise' and have 'more manners'.

SCW, at the time of this study, was the newest and one of the most exclusive malls in Delhi with many western brands represented, including *Marks & Spencers*, as well as branded Indian goods. It carries its own sense of identity, as 'western', modern; a subjectivity consumed and expressed by this group. The young women agreed that 'hardly anyone' could be seen wearing a sari at SCW, and 'then they are like ... aunties' (Leena, laughs). These codes of consumption and affective distinctions exclude Balbir and Rabia; both university students but from very different backgrounds to Leena and her friends. Balbir's family is from south India and live in a *basti* behind a wealthy suburb in south Delhi[i]. Rabia describes herself as from an 'average' middle class family. She dislikes places such as the upmarket cinema area of Vasant Vihar, that are a favourite haunt of Jaya, for example. She draws links between her discomfort and her cultural frames of reference.

Because I'm not from that background. I'm from a middle class family with average income. I was not grown up in a very rich way. I don't feel comfortable in very rich areas. (...).

They scan me, from top to bottom, like X-ray gaze. [...] Their behaviour also. Loudly talking without thinking of others, they start music in the cell phones or talk loudly. You feel yourself different in some way. Sometimes it gives me a kind of empowerment also. I can see things in a different way. They are violating my private space (Rabia).

While dressed in the uniform of global youth culture, jeans and t-shirt, Rabia still feels out of place, and that those 'x-ray' eyes somehow know she is not from Delhi, that English is not her first language, that she cannot afford branded jeans, perhaps even that she is Muslim living in a predominantly Punjabi, Hindu and Sikh city. Balbir also notes affective restrictions on his entry into more upmarket areas such as Vasant Vihar, even though one of his relatives works as a driver there: 'because it is a posh area but they are looking at us [as] not their status. In between us, the status comes'.

Gendered Distinctions

In public space in Delhi, gendered expectations also come between people. There is no escaping the predominance of the male body in the city that inevitably led to a strong narrative of affective exclusion for the young women in the study. There are no stories of moving through the city at night in their journals unless they are inflected with fear and insecurity (unlike in the writing of some of the young men).

Charu lives in a resettlement colony in the north-east of the city. The young women living here have circumscribed mobility through customary communal monitoring. The tight, congested buildings of the resettlement colony enclose the young women that live there. Their narratives are heavily inflected with insecurity and frustration at the constraining gaze of the male and their families, countered by the pleasure they express in the occasional excursion 'outside' eg to a park or tourist area like India Gate/Rashtrapati Bhavan. For this group there is a greater sense of exclusion from the global, cosmopolitan city.

They live in ever-decreasing circles of mobility, avoiding *gullies* (lanes) and young men who 'say just about anything to all the girls who go that way' (Nomi), and enduring the physical bumps and verbal barbs that this area requires. They feel 'irritation', 'frustration', and 'fear' of boys and dogs and buffalos sharing the lanes (Tavishi), and 'anger' at the impertinence of others who 'misuse' the public space (for example, queue-jumping in the ration shop, or bicycles blocking shop entrances). Many of the young women expressed a dislike of the settlement and its 'ambience' [translated].

The 'ambience' of this quarter exemplifies Anderson's (2009: 77-8) description of 'affective qualities that emanate from but exceed the assembling of bodies'. It is a collective atmosphere that 'envelopes' and 'presses upon' these young women. However, the 'ambience' of this quarter is far from being ephemeral and unstable as Anderson argues. It is redolent, heavy with 'tradition', the accumulated expectations of the place of the body of the woman in the home and the street. It shapes and manipulates that body as much as the ambience of mega-malls such as Select City Walk impact on the 'consumer-citizen' of Middle Class Delhi.

The sense of enclosure for women in the city in general is reflected in Rabia's comments that 'sometimes again I feel we all are in a harem'. These bodies enclosed are juxtaposed to Hemish's ability to adapt. Visibly an outsider in Delhi, he describes how he attempts to 'shape myself to be like a man from Hindi [north India] mainstream so that I can adjust myself from bus conductor to my classmates'. No matter how much they contort themselves, these young women are unlikely to leave except through marriage.

Even for the young women from upper income families, comportment and space use is heavily determined by expectations of gendered behaviour. When Leena wore a short denim skirt to go to a bar at the five star Ashoka Hotel, she encountered her own limits in the city.

I immediately felt uncomfortable as what seemed like a hundred eyes seemed to look at me in amazement at the short skirt I was wearing even though it was at a hotel. At that moment my only wish was to miraculously disappear and reappear INSIDE *F Bar*. But unfortunately I couldn't do that, I had to walk through the stares. However, the minute I reached *F Bar* I suddenly felt normal again. Like I fit in!! (Leena)

Conclusion

In the crowded public spaces of Delhi, in its streets and shopping precincts, or on its public transport, the body must be flexible. It must bend and twist and absorb the inevitable physical and sensory collisions. Or it can remove itself entirely if the discomfort generated in possessing different cultural frames of reference that guide reflexive and conscious movement and opinion is too great. It can be made invisible, hiding or removing itself. Such adjustments were evident in the movement through Delhi of the young people in this study, in their experience of the city, demarcating spaces of pleasure and discomfort, inclusion and exclusion, and affectively dissecting the city into the civil and uncivil. In particular, they reiterated boundaries of distinction as an affective response to the 'disorder' of things and people out of place, to a slippage in former distinctions (e.g. 'lower class' shoppers in the upper class malls), highlighting the intimate connection between the physical and affective bounding of space.

Distinction was drawn by and on the body, evident in appearance, consumption, responses to noise and smell. 'Proper' behaviour, civility, marked out boundaries of inclusion and exclusion created through adherence to the 'rules' and routines of public space generated in the recitation of culturally embedded everyday practices such as shopping. While stereotyping by some participants of others was obvious, these subjective judgements also provided a sense of order and comfort in a complex urban environment, and demonstrated a sense of self as the benchmark of determining difference. The 'rules and routines of ordering public space' (Amin 2008: 14) were inculcated through on-going culturally embedded practice and social interaction with more familiar, more comfortable others.

Therefore, their reiteration, and challenging, of boundaries of distinction, both physical and affective, also challenged debates that remove the subjective from accounts of the affective experience of the city. The shared knowledge of 'correct' spatial organisation, activity and representations of civility, what and who is permissible or not in a particular space at a particular time, are cultural markers. The use and understanding of space informed by this accumulated knowledge, was affectively circulated in the judgements of sights, smells, noise, and touch of others, the crowds at times too close for comfort (Tyler 2006). This sensory experience was often the first indication that something was out of place, themselves or something/someone other.

As a result, the spaces of Delhi became part of a system of classification; containing rules and conventions that could differ according to gender, religious affiliation and class status (and also other factors not included in the scope of this paper, such as age). Deviations from cultural benchmarks, norms of order and predictability, generated feelings of insecurity and exclusion, whereas habitual, expected, movement, smell, sounds etc, maintained particular spaces as comfortable. Measures could be taken to manage or counteract the uncivil, the unpredictable or the unknown, for example, avoidance or the deployment of a 'suspicious' gaze against a body judged as out of place.

There is complexity in this process, however, as Rose et al. (2010) have argued. Memory, comparison, the re-appropriation of space, its multiple

uses, in this instance in a regenerating city where new spaces provide an opportunity for a re-conceptualisation of the rules, all compete for attention. While there was an assignation of meaning to space there were at times, and in specific contexts, challenges to that meaning and the position of boundaries. Spatial transformation and human resilience has the potential to create fuzzy, flexible boundaries. The democratising potential of space is noted in particular locations: rooftops, tea stalls, the Metro rail. Despite these breathing spaces, the findings suggest that the 'cleaning' up of Delhi, the attempts to remove the sights, smells and sounds of poverty as part of the aesthetics of global living, reinforce affective distinctions as existing cultural hierarchies are transposed onto a gentrifying city.

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