

Retelling the neighbourhood

All cities and towns contain fragments of ecological and historic landscapes that are intimately linked to spaces of human residential and livelihood settlements. When the city or town is explored from the perspective of the people, a more humanistic understanding of the local emerges. The following articles are reflections from two 'Humanities across Borders (HaB)'-supported projects – 'Delhi Memory Archive' and 'From Forest to Town: Transformation of the Commons' – both carried out by the Centre for Community Knowledge (CCK) at Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD). Although from two different perspectives, their shared attempt is to explore the various ways in which meanings and identities are associated with the neighbourhoods that make up a city or a town. These have been enriched by exchanges with other HaB projects. We warmly invite other scholars and practitioners to share with us their experience and understanding of 'neighbourhood' across all dynamic socio-cultural realities.



Above: Imitation of Stayfree sanitary pads sold at the Saturday Market. Photo by Shorbori Purkayastha.

Left: Vendor measuring spices in paper bags made of old newspaper. Photo by: Shorbori Purkayastha.

Sensing the layers: notes from a weekly market

Mesha Murali

Remember, as a teenager, reluctantly accompanying my mother to the weekly market in our neighbourhood in East Delhi every Thursday. In the evening, the usual shopping street would be taken over by street vendors selling clothes, artificial jewellery, utensils and miscellaneous household items and vegetables. The residents would tick items off their weekly shopping list. My mother would insist that we take our jute bags along to make it easier to bring home a week-worth of vegetables. To be sure, we weren't the only ones to stock-up for a week, and I would spot one or two, if not more, people dragging trolley bags or suitcases across the market.

Almost every neighbourhood in Delhi has a similar weekly market that acts as a one-stop shopping destination for the residents of nearby colonies. In the course of our fieldwork for the Neighbourhood Museum Project in 2014-15 and subsequent years, we developed the approach of reading the city and its people through neighbourhoods and sites such as weekly markets. While the site of my childhood memory is from a different neighbourhood, the Shadipur Shani Bazaar (Shadipur Saturday Market) is used in this article as a similar example, to explore how local voices and perceptions, however

small and commonplace, are important in understanding the complexities and multi-layered realities of a place.

More than the products sold there

The Shadipur Shani Bazaar is a large weekly informal market in XYZ block of Shadi-Khampur neighbourhood in West Delhi, India.¹ This weekly market is best known for its unstitched and stitched fabrics. Among its many customers are high-end boutique owners from West Delhi, who buy fabric and embellishments to accessorise their products. While some residents say that the market started around 1995-97, others remember its beginnings as a small cloth market in the late 1970s, to be discontinued and set-up again in the 90s. Today, this weekly market, like others, also has vendors selling food, spices, toys and knick-knacks. But it is much more than the products sold there. It is also a site where various interconnections between the city, neighbourhoods and its people are visible at the micro-level. These interconnections could be that of economic co-dependence between vendors and residents or of the power dynamics between genders in the market space.

An interesting way of observing these interconnections and relationships between people and place is through narratives and local walkabouts. In our walkabout, we noticed an exchange of money and a payment-slip between vendors and a group of men. During an interview with the market *pradhan* [organiser], we were told that each vendor selling at the weekly market is required to make a token payment, ranging from Rs 10-50 depending on the size of the stall. The *pradhan* uses a portion of the money collected to pay off the police while the rest goes to the local *Madrassa* [Islamic educational institution]. The *pradhan*, responsible for space management and for handling disputes at the market, provides access to the colony parks and streets where the vendors man their shops between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. Since the streets are narrow, he also ensures that residents move their cars out every Saturday morning to make space for the stalls.

Visual observations such as these put together with narratives from people's memory and their experience of a place helped us understand the broader framework of how spaces within a city are managed and organised. Similarly, other sensorial observations or experiences, such as sounds, smells, touch and taste, also became

interesting tools in exploring the concepts of space, community, gender, identity and class aspirations, among others. These sensorial experiences are, however, not always independent of each other. It is when layered together that they reveal a holistic picture of the place and its people. To gain a meaningful and locally embedded understanding of a neighbourhood, it is important to go beyond the simplistic or literal meaning of the senses. For example, when we feel a texture or touch a person, the full experience of 'touch' is more than just a physical feeling.

Visuals of class aspirations

After a close look at a stall selling cosmetic products, one might very well spot a copy of some well-known brand. With brand imitation of everyday products such as sanitary napkins or make-up products, sold at low prices, this market primarily, but not exclusively, caters to customers from the middleclass who aspire to lead a certain lifestyle, as a marker of upward class mobility. In conversation, a local vendor stated that the daily soaps on TV also influence the demand for certain cosmetics. Female customers often ask for products sported by their favourite television actors. This makes the low-cost

weekly street markets a significant destination for imitation products. These products create distribution channels and establish an economic presence in society and also create local job opportunities.

Smells like home?

Filling the streets of the neighbourhood with mouth-watering aromas are food stalls selling meat, fish and vegetarian *chaat* (savoury bites of fruits or potatoes). Street vendors and customers alike visit these stalls to relish their delicacies. While most vendors prefer to save money and bring along their own food and water, some opt for the *tiffins* [lunchbox] of *dal chawal* (lentil and rice dish) or *rajma chawal* (kidney bean and rice dish) prepared at local stalls. The latter are generally migrants in search of a livelihood in the big city, without access to home-cooked meals. While studying a marketplace, such everyday negotiations of the workers are often overlooked. Details such as these give us a better understanding of who the service providers/receivers are in an informal market and from where they come.

When asked whether there had been any visible changes in the taste preferences of the customers, a resident of Shadipur told us, "You now get *sambar* (a type of South Indian curry) packets and all kinds of South Indian vegetables... we get a packet of mixed cut vegetables for *sambar* at Rs 30...". As the neighbourhood saw an increased influx of people from South India, especially Kerala, the market introduced new products and staples to cater to this specific demographic. Interpersonal relationships, in which the vendors know their customers, are important aspects on which such informal markets thrive. To know what will sell, one needs to know to whom one is selling. These patterns of consumption not only hint towards a changing demographic in the neighbourhood, but also illustrate the various economic flows in the market that connect people and food.

Multi-layered reality

Reading a place becomes more meaningful when we also take note of what is absent. What is it that is missing that one might find in other similar places? Easiest to notice are the visual absences. The Shadipur Saturday market barely has any female vendors, even though such markets are essential for the women who manage the household. The few female vendors shared that the lack of local contacts and inadequate facilities such as toilets were reasons that discouraged participation. Unlike male vendors, the female vendors didn't have an extensive network of already established vendors that made it easier to find a place in the market. While the male vendors can access the public toilets located just outside the colony, the women either have to hold it till they return home or rely on a resident to be kind enough to let them use their toilet. Taking note of such absences and using them as cues for exploration helps to unravel issues of infrastructure and space management and the ways in which they add to the gendering of spaces.

My memory of being dragged to the weekly market is now grounded in a larger perspective. The above exploration attempts to break away from stereotypes of city neighbourhoods by researching local histories, stories and places relevant to life within a community. Studying the flow of people, livelihoods, goods and commerce in Shadi-Khampur brings forth the multi-layered reality of the everyday, which usually tends to be ignored in the imaginings of the city space. The neighbourhood thus becomes a site of exploring micro-histories of living in a city and how places evolve to accommodate the changing needs and lifestyle of its residents. Using such sensorial experiences (not limited to those mentioned above) as tools of observation and exploration can help draw our attention to the complexities and nuances of everyday realities that are sometimes missed in research on neighbourhoods guided by abstract concepts alone.

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Below: Artisan Kamlabai Banskar stitches a basket, Ayodhya Basti, Pipariya, 2017, Photo from CCK archives.



Reading the silences: unheard stories of a town

Kumar Unnayan

The growing urbanisation in India has witnessed an exponential increase in census towns over the past few decades. Amidst the country's rapidly changing forest and farm landscapes, the rising townships are important sites of understanding everyday social mobilities at a local and microscopic level. The understanding of place-specific narratives in such settlements presents us with the opportunity to assemble a public-centric, multi-dimensional account of mobilities that draws upon the archives of orality and memory. A pool of local narratives can sometimes "reveal lesser-known stories of a place and have the possibility of disturbing meta-narratives with their access to alternative strands of knowledge."²

Beginning in 2017, the research project 'From Forest to Town: Narratives of Transformation of the Commons' aimed to look at the lived experiences of the local residents in one such town through first-hand oral narratives. The narratives were placed within an arena of tension and struggles of several local communities and the interconnectedness of their socio-cultural heritage. They are as much marked by a sense of resilience as by conflict. As private and public memories come together, a non-linear story of everyday negotiations unfolds around mobilities vis-à-vis power relations, caste hierarchies and local information networks.

A bustling new town

Pipariya in Madhya Pradesh, India, lies along the east-west cross country railway line at a wide point in the Narmada valley. Long-time residents often retrace the town's origins to the linking of Jabalpur-Itarsi section (March 1870) on the Bombay-Calcutta railway line in the colonial era. As a railhead brimming with avenues of trade and commerce, it didn't take very long for the then hamlet of Pipariya to attract people from the neighbouring villages and far-flung regions. The early Gond and Korcu tribal inhabitants were soon joined by Goojar, Marwari, Kutchi, Sindhi, Barauaa, Borah, Jain, Irani, Kanjar, Mehtar, Basod and a number of other communities. Inevitably, the conjoined histories of the now bustling town emerge from the multiplicity of the diverse narratives of these groups.

In one of the recorded conversations, local pulse and oil trader Kishore Shah (83), a third-generation migrant businessman from Gujarat, iterated that, "in the early days, this town was synonymous with only the railway station. It still is". Railways are a significant marker in the quaint town's public history. But with more than two lakh registered voters, it has long ceased to be a mere railhead and is now a centre of a rapid growing agro-commercial economy. Pipariya assembles the agricultural and farm produce of the neighbouring villages. The in-flow of people from these villages is a familiar sight to the local populace. A fair share of small-scale vendors

flock to the town's daily/weekly bazaars to sell vegetables, fruits, spices, pickles, dry fruits, street-food, sugarcane juice, fish, broomsticks, toys, wood/bamboo paraphernalia and many other essential commodities. Many have lived on the outskirts for generations and aspire to find their feet within the urban epicentre. As he prepared the stall in the weekly Itwara bazaar, Radheyshyam Ahirwar (66) remarked, "I grew up in the nearby village of Gadaghat and worked as a farm-labourer in the fields of upper-castes. It's only after my son became a driver that we started selling vegetables. It pays better but not enough to live in the main town".

Living on the margins

While the quoted excerpt highlights a singular narrative, the equations between social strata and mobility become more apparent in the community narratives of the skilled bamboo artisans of Basod *samaaj*.³ Munnalal Banskar (62), who was joined by other *samaaj* members as we spoke to him, recounted that many Basod families moved to the town from the nearby villages to escape the atrocities of upper castes. Concentrated at the Ripta Bridge, the families have been living on the town's peripheries for more than three decades. Bamboo products such as baskets, carpets, brooms, handheld fans, along with barrel-shaped drums, dot the sideways outside their huts. With insecure access to civic amenities, their unauthorised thatch roof huts are frequently bulldozed by the local authorities. The community's isolation is reflected in Munnalal's words, "[t]here is an old saying in our Bundeli language. 'Once you have had a taste of the village's water and the city's money, you can't forget either of them'. But we have been denied both. We were harassed in the village. The city has barely paid heed to us. We have lived here for so long. My daughter got married here. My grandchildren were born here. Yet we feel that we moved from one place only to become invisible in the other. Isn't this our home too?"

The Basods are one of the largest groups among the state's notified Scheduled Caste population, and most are also landless. Their experiences indicate how the local mobilities are regulated through the power relations and information networks of the upper as well as locally dominant caste groups. With no landholding of their own, a number of low-caste communities tackle the inequitable challenge of making a livelihood through such networks. The failure to become a part pushes them further to the margins of the local demographics. They are there but yet never noticed. At this juncture, community ethnographies that deal with the negotiation of the social fabric can operate from two tangents. While they counter the mainstream imaginings of a place/neighbourhood/community, they are also capable of becoming narratives of struggles and reclamation of space by the people that inhabit them.

Adapting to market demand

The community narratives of another notified backward community, Barauaa Kahaar *samaaj*, provide further insights in the matter. The *samaaj* traces their early caste-bound professions as water porters, fishermen and riverbed farmers. As the professions became obsolete, they resorted to becoming domestic and agricultural helpers as well as undertaking odd labour such as cattle herding. As vegetable sellers, caretakers and domestic helpers, they had to continually navigate the public and personal spaces of the town and thus became a part of the information network of the locale. The nature of their mobility marked itself as a somewhat familiar sight in the town over a period of time. It stands in sharp contrast to the Basods who did not venture out much, except during the fairs, bazaars and other festivities. Today, many Barauaas have built cement houses and set up small scale house-run-shops of their own.

Unlike the Barauaas, the Basods have been a community heavily dependent on their artisanal skills for a livelihood. The Basods' relatively late entrance to the town coincided with the arrival on the market of cheap plastic products, which only made them more vulnerable. The demand for bamboo products has gone down drastically. The artisans also claim that the nationalisation of bamboo and the government organisation of the bamboo industry has resulted in a mafia that controls the supply of the raw product. Naturally, they are challenged to expand their skill-set to earn a living. It doesn't come as a surprise that many from the new generation are unwilling to continue the work and have taken up new occupations such as playing the drums at wedding ceremonies or during funeral processions. The latter is another caste-bound profession in many parts of the country.

Social mobility denied

The narratives supplement the fact that disadvantaged communities such as Basods and Barauaas are continually denied a move upwards on the social pyramid, as the opportunities to wriggle out of caste roles are often made scarce. The mobilities of both communities are central to the town's transformation from the inside. Yet, it is rather telling that outside their inhabitations, most of the recorded local conversations remained either dismissive or reluctant to delve into their mobilities and struggles. In return, the communities have a lot to say, but are seldom heard. During a group conversation on the significance of oral testimonies in understanding social mobilities, a fellow researcher and a local resident shared an observation: "In any town, a few places are more silent than others."

The many oral, informal and personalised narratives of a growing township such as Pipariya can become instrumental in understanding how different stakeholders relate to the claims of social productions of collective pasts and present-day realities. The use of individual and community narratives can undo the popular discourses associated with a place. It also helps to contextualise the local realities against the wider global dynamics. Understanding experiences of mobilities among different communities is one among the many examples that emphasise the urgency to go past the top-to-bottom approach to reading a place.

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Notes

- 1 Officially known as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Colony, the XYZ block (known as such unofficially) was a resettlement colony for the families who lost their homes during the demolitions that took place during the Emergency in 1975-77 in Old Delhi area.
- 2 Sarkar, S. (unpublished) Preface, *Aise Basi Pipariya*, CCK, AUD.
- 3 *Samaaj*: The Hindi term is widely used by the locals to refer to different caste groups, rather than to 'society as a whole' or a voluntary association.