

A Tale of the City of Kolkata Through the Eyes of the “Common Women”

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Abstract

This paper focuses on working-class women from the informal settlements of Kolkata, India and their precarious relationships with the city. Their existence at the margins of society (socially, spatially, historically, and sometimes even geographically) tends to make them invisible actors in the production of contemporary urban spaces of Kolkata. This paper examines the role of class, caste, and gender in informing the spatial practices of these minoritized women that occur in the city’s liminal landscapes. These practices are quite distinct from those of women from middle- and upper-classes in Kolkata. Terms like “public women” or “bad women” or *chhotolok* (a common Bengali term used for people from lower classes or castes) have been used to represent and mark these working-class, lower caste women as deviant bodies in terms of their class, caste, and even sexualities. These labels are important to understand how these women have been represented historically in the urban history of Kolkata. By analyzing secondary literature, archival texts, songs, films, poems, and photographs, the paper investigates the following interrelated questions. First, how has the spatial organization of urban Kolkata historically determined the ways in which these women have navigated, engaged with, and attempted to overcome a wide array of structural and systemic constraints? And second, how have these women produced and applied various forms of situated spatial knowledge in the city’s liminal landscapes?

In terms of the paper’s structure, I start by analyzing the existing literature on gender and urban space in India. Thereafter, I lay a theoretical groundwork to elucidate the importance of adopting an intersectional lens to understand overlapping regimes of power that affect the life-worlds of minoritized bodies; in this case, the working-class lower caste women of Kolkata. Finally, I use a chronological approach to examine the changes in Kolkata’s urban fabric and its material culture that have significantly added to the precarities faced by these minoritized and marginalized women. In other words, I trace an alternate urban history of Kolkata through the eyes of these “common women.”

Keywords: common women, public and private, liminal landscapes, respectability, normativity.

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INTRODUCTION

The ubiquity of informal settlements in India and their deprivation is a result of histories of colonialism, imperialism, ongoing structural racisms, gender and class inequalities, religious fundamentalism, and caste structures. Working-class, lower caste women in informal settlements face specific vulnerabilities and limitations to their mobility in the city due to a multitude of factors. These informal settlements, home to 33 percent of Kolkata's population, are characterized by overcrowding, precarious housing conditions, insufficient access to resources, lack of tenure, and hazardous housing ("The Challenge of Slums - Global Report on Human Settlements 2003" 2003). These conditions underline the gendered nature of risks that these women undertake to fulfill their essential bodily functions and labor while leading their ordinary everyday lives (McFarlane 2014; Datta 2016). In addition, in Kolkata, these settlements have historically existed at the urban margins, geographically and metaphorically, because of a strict hierarchical spatial division of the city based on a socially oppressive system of caste and occupational structures. Finally, and most importantly, the intersections of caste and class have impacts on these women's mobility, which is sometimes a form of freedom and sometimes a form of coercion. Thus, this paper explores the placemaking practices of working-class women living in informal settlements of Kolkata. It analyzes how the class and caste of these women affected the ways in which they imagined, lived and perceived the changing urban landscapes of the city and how they have been historically represented in binary opposition to respectable upper- and middle-class women.

There is a significant body of literature that addresses the relationships between gender and the physical spaces of a society. However, this literature is very limited even though such relationships can be seen from the scale of the household to the scale of the city, region or nation, and beyond. Different scholars from diverse fields such as architecture, urban planning, sociology, geography, and gender studies have explored how women have been typically excluded and deprived of their rights to full participation in urban spaces (Fenster 2005; Pain 1991; Wilson 1991). Women's fear of using urban spaces is further exacerbated by the design and planning of our cities. Not only gender, but race, class, religion, ethnicity, and other markers of social difference are reflected in the spatial organization of cities (Massey 2005). Likewise, in the context of Indian cities, different socio-cultural norms, historical ideologies and practices have created a "cultural anxiety" about women's presence in public spaces of the city (Sewell 2000, 22). Growing from everyday encounters, women's concerns about sexual violence and loss of respectability underpin

ever-present fears of violence, lack of autonomy, and mobility challenges they face on a daily basis.

In the last three decades, there has been substantial research in India that focuses on the tensions and everyday contestations faced by women while moving through urban space. Shilpa Ranade (2007) in her seminal piece uses a participatory mapping exercise in Mumbai to examine the differences in the ways in which men and women engage with urban spaces. Her study indicated that while men could be located anywhere in the city, even without a purpose; women, on the other hand, chose routes in the city where they could either become invisible or be seen by multiple "domestic (and therefore women's) eyes on the street" (Ranade 2007, 1524). Women's ways of moving in the city discreetly and with a sense of purpose while manufacturing respectability for themselves have also been discussed by many other scholars. Phadke et. al (2009) argue that even today women's presence in public spaces of the city continue to be framed within the binaries of public and private. These discourses have created an opposition between the 'good' woman, who should be restricted to the private realm, unlike the 'bad' woman who loiters in the public realm without a purpose. In order to manufacture respectability and demonstrate their protection-worthiness, women adopt a complex series of strategies, such as, wearing appropriate clothing, carrying bulky accessories, and wearing traditional markers of matrimony with a contained body language, thus, illustrating their linkages to familial structures and acceptable notions of femininity (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2009). The challenges that women face in their mobility and the strategies that they adopt are complex. They are informed by individual and societal concerns and the shifting nature of discourses and politics that regulate their behavior and conduct in public spaces of the city. For example, Aparna Parikh (2018) discusses how women working night shifts in call centers of India often use public transportation such as trains and buses despite the availability of company transportation, because the former option is considered safer. Women often had to manage their household responsibilities like buying groceries or finishing chores before going to work at night. Using company transportation that had fixed timings or required advance booking and penalty did not allow women to simultaneously manage their familial responsibilities along with their work. Additionally, availing company transportation also sometimes meant travelling in a 'closed' private space of the vehicle with other male colleagues as opposed to the public environs of a train or a bus. Thus, women's choices of mobility always entailed navigating the paradox of honor and safety managing their household responsibilities and their idealized roles as 'good' wives, mothers or daughters alongside their productive

responsibilities at work. All these studies indicate that the preservation of the family or nation's honor is of utmost importance for women, even if it outweighs the value placed on their actual safety (Phadke 2007).

Most of this research is useful in understanding the complex terrains of social, cultural and political factors that determine women's normative behavior and access to urban space. Nonetheless, the existing research homogenizes 'women,' eliding differences based on socio-economic backgrounds, caste, religion, ethnicity, or even citizenship. As Chandra Mohanty (2003) points out, even the "third world women gets constructed as a singular monolithic identity, who is subject to oppression as a result of a singular, homogenous, notion of patriarchy or male dominance (19)." These universalistic assumptions render women from informal settlements as largely invisible communities who continue to remain outside the 'mainstream' both temporally and spatially. Historically, in the context of Kolkata, social mores and values of feudalism, a colonially mediated modernity and the discourses around nationalism created a new moral terrain dictating behavioral norms, especially for respectable women from middle-class backgrounds or the *bhadra mahilas* (a common Bengali term used to refer to respectable women (Bhandar and Ziadah 2020). These respectable, essentialized women figures have historically been and continue to be the national signifier for the community and their bodies, behaviors, and reproduction of space are controlled by those with the power to remember and to forget, to guard, to define, and redefine (Spivak 1987; Kaplan et al. 1999; Sangari and Vaid 1989). On the other hand, racialized women from lower class or caste and Muslim women were excluded from these nationalist discourses and were not seen as respectable enough. Terms like 'public women' or 'common women' or *chhotolok* were used to label them and mark them as non-normative bodies in the city landscapes. Thus, this paper foregrounds the precarious life-worlds, struggles and spatial experiences of these invisibilized women from informal settlements of Kolkata. To do so, I focus on literary texts, government ordinances, reports, maps and archival photographs, films, songs, and poems in order to understand how the everyday life-worlds of the common women have been historically embedded within structural and epistemic inequalities.

URBAN HISTORY OF CALCUTTA AND INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

Prior to colonial invasion, Calcutta¹ was comprised of three villages—Sutanuti, Kalikata and Gobindapur,

1 The city was known as Calcutta until 2001. The name change to Kolkata was a conscious political move to reject the anglicized version of the name. Thus, the name 'Calcutta' will be used in this text to discuss the early time periods.



Figure 1: Map of Calcutta (1851) showing "White Town and "Black Town". <https://victorianweb.org/history/empire/india/calcutta/1.html>.

along the Hooghly River. It was mostly occupied by agrarian and fishing communities. After the revolt of 1757, the East India Company defeated the Nawabs of Bengal, taking control of the region around the three villages and establishing their power by rebuilding their fort in the South around the village of Gobindapur (P. Sinha 1978; Ghosh 2016). Calcutta as an urban center underwent significant changes in its spatial layout after this period. The process of building the fort and developing the region for the colonizers entailed rapid eviction of the indigenous population from those areas. The city was divided along racial lines, with the area around the fort and to the south of it occupied by the British and Europeans and the northern and western part of the city inhabited by the native population. The color coding and naming of these parts of the city as the White Town and Black Town reinforced the imperialistic imaginary and racialized logic. The White Town in its sparsely distributed spatial layout was distinct from the close-knit urban fabric of Black Town (See Figure 1). While the 'modern' White Town was characterized by European style villas, official buildings, wide streets, modern sewers parks, and gaslights, the Black Town, was synonymized with disease, filth and



Figure 2: Hand colored etching of Esplanade Row from the river to the Council House in Calcutta. Creator: William Baillie. The British Library London, <https://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/other/019pzz000000729u00000000.html>

squalor because of its narrow lanes, overcrowded living quarters and polluted streets (Ghosh 2016). In spite of their spatial, social and cultural distinctiveness, the Black Town and the White Town were not autonomous and their political and social conditions penetrated each other (Chattopadhyay 2006). For example, in the Black Town, the social structure was centered around the households of the landholding class, also known as *zamindars*, rich merchants and their relatives, opulent *dewans*, who emulated the lifestyle of the colonizers (Banerjee 1989; Ghosh 2016). Increased interactions with the colonizers led the Bengali respectable classes move toward developing some standard behavioral and cultural norms in order to distinguish themselves from their lower orders. Also, these merchants invested heavily in property in the area by renting out their land in parts for the slums or *bustees*², which were occupied by migrants from the villages. The proliferation of slums as an urban typology in Calcutta after the nineteenth

century was a result of migration of working-class people to the city in search of jobs, and it was also indicative of the increased dependence of both the White Town and Black Town on the services and labor of the working class. However, the living conditions and the urban configurations in these quarters were quite distinct from those of the opulent households surrounding them. An excerpt from James Ranald Martin's writing in the *Notes on the Medical Topography of Calcutta*, noted the following condition of these settlements:

Peculiarly exposed through its low, closely packed houses, ill ventilated street, great stagnant ditches, lined with rank vegetation, its background on extensive marsh and underwoods and its innumerable half dried tanks. (Martin 1837, 10)

Not only were the living conditions in these settlements unsanitary, but they were also associated with crime and illegal activities. A popular folk song that acted as a

² *Bustee* is a term used interchangeable with 'slums'- a term commonly used in India to describe informal settlements.

street guide depicted this satirically:

*Baghbajare ganjar adda, gulir Konnagar.
Bat talae mader adda, chondur bowbajare...*

Bagh bazaar is the center of hemp-smoking, Konnagar of opium pills, Bat Tala is the center of drinking and Bowbajar of opium-smoking. (Sumanta Banerjee 1989b, 87)

The unhygienic living conditions in the informal settlements posed a serious threat to the rational, disciplined order of the colonial city. The colonizers' dislike toward these settlements and the native city was also evident in their paintings and the ways in which they represented the city of Calcutta. For example, the vantage point from which William Baillie chose to paint an image of Calcutta and his emphasis on few selective elements of the European landscape such as the Church, the government house, the Tank square (See Figure 2) while leaving out the native city, clearly indicates his strategic silence in dealing with the problems of the city and instead fetishizing the elite landscapes (Chattopadhyay 2006). Further, with the spread of diseases like cholera, malaria, and tuberculosis, the British government became increasingly concerned with the health of their people and the overall cleanliness of the city. The colonizers saw the cleanliness of these settlements as being directly linked with their character and they assumed tones of moral superiority claiming that the natives had to learn the precious gifts of civilization by adopting cleanly habits (Beattie 2003). E.P. Richards, the chief engineer of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, said,

The evils of such slums were responsible for most social problems known to mankind, including crime, insanity and disease. Finally, they produced by far the highest percentage of all bad, weakly and useless citizens and were highly destructive of wholesome family life. (Richards 1914, 301)

Thus, with the motive of social control and the desire to achieve a disciplined, hygienic, and technologically advanced modernity, the colonial government started rampant demolition of *bustees* and old structures to make way for the development of civic amenities like hospitals, colleges, shopping areas, parks, etc. (Ghosh 2016). Other sanitary measures that were incorporated included street widening, beautification of *ghats*, improvements of public drains and water courses and regulation of slaughterhouses and places of burial (Beattie 2003; Ghosh 2016). However, with such sanitary measures in place, the minoritized citizens of the informal settlements were not only evicted from their land, but they were also excluded from participating in the new public spaces of the city. For example, the Chief

Magistrate of the government in an official letter to the Secretary of the state noted,

I would propose that the Mint Gardens as it stands, and also the southern portion above referred to be converted into a public garden under my own charge...To prevent, the garden being crowded by herds of common natives from the neighboring bazaars, whose presence would probably deter the more classes from enjoying it. ("To the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Fort William Judicial" 1855)

The aesthetic development of the landscapes of colonial Calcutta led to the erasure of minoritized bodies from them and furthering their feelings of unbelonging to the city. Living in these settlements meant being constantly on the move with threats of being surveilled, cleansed, and evicted. Thus, the next section of my paper discusses the lives of working-class women and their non-normative spatial practices as they occupied the liminal landscapes of the city.

WORKING-CLASS WOMEN AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY CALCUTTA

Life for working-class women in informal settlements was quite distinct from their "sheltered sisters," or the women from middle- and upper- class who were confined to the domestic sphere (Banerjee 1989a, 129). As discussed earlier, the colonizers and the native elites connected the adverse socio-economic conditions faced by the lower class in these settlements with their immorality of character, aberrant behavior, and violence. Thus, the *bhadramahila* (the respectable woman from middle and upper-class households) had to be protected from these dangerous neighborhoods and were restricted to the private realm of the household. On the other hand, women from lower socio-economic groups not only had their private lives open to public gaze in their neighborhoods, but also had to balance between their caregiving responsibilities and income generating activities for the household by constantly navigating between the public and private realm. Thus, the binary of public-private as a masculine-feminine divide did not quite neatly apply to the livelihoods of these other women. They assisted the men of the household with their traditional occupations like cultivation, pottery, spinning, basket-making along with their own income-generating activities. Their engagement with the public spaces of the city also extended through different kinds of cultural activities like community singing and dancing during festivals, as well as performing *bratas* (rituals relating mainly to birth, marriage, and death) (Banerjee 1989a). Participating in these religious and cultural activities was not only part of their aspiration but was also important for them to assert their presence in the

public realm and mark their complementarity with men. It is also important to note that the normative notion of the private realm of the home as a safe space did not hold true for these women, where they faced intimate violence even at home. They also faced challenges and lacked privacy to fulfill their essential bodily functions in these settlements. For example, their living habits had to be changed drastically as they moved to the urban areas from their rural surroundings. Neither did they have access to fields or bushes in the city nor did they have the financial means to build special privies³ in the settlements where they lived (Banerjee 2009). Thus, they were forced to use open drains that ran publicly through the streets for their private bodily needs. These living habits that were natural for them in rural areas became a point of contention between the colonizers and the natives and such activities were therefore criminalized.

While discussing the notions of public and private, it is important to also illuminate the differences between the Bengali nineteenth-century idea of publicness and the Habermasian notion of the ideal bourgeois public sphere that has been discussed by many scholars (P. Chatterjee 1993; Chakrabarty 1999; Chattopadhyay 2006). According to these scholars, Bengali society with their nationalist imaginings adopted an anti-colonial attitude by linking privacy and publicness into two domains of the material and spiritual. Women were idealized as *grihalaxmi* (goddess of the hearth) and they had to be protected from the evils of the colonial material world outside (Bhandar and Ziadah 2020). The family and home became the core of the new moral topography that forged the formation of a new nation (Panjabi and Chakravarti 2013). These ideologies determined the ways in which respectable middle- and upper-class women (mostly) could be exposed to public view and represented in the nineteenth and 20th centuries. These notions of normativity in conduct and behavior were established by marking the deviant behaviors of the non-normative public women or common women from the lower class and castes. In the next section, I will be examining visual archives that help us understand how different forms of visual representation reflected the nuances of social, cultural, and political life and the multiple hues of a new urbanity emerging in nineteenth century Calcutta.

One of the most popular art forms of nineteenth century Calcutta are the Kalighat *pat* paintings that date back to the scroll paintings of the *patuas*⁴ of rural Bengal.

3 Privies are toilets located in a small shed outside the house.

Earlier, in the context of many Indian cities, toilets were seen as impure spaces and were always placed outside the house.

4 *Patuas* are painters of scrolls and their history can be traced back roughly to the 13th century. They would tell stories of gods and goddesses through these paintings and go around the villages



Figure 3: Kalighat *pat* painting of a woman churning milk. Artist: Uttam Chitrakar. Victoria and Albert Museum, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1241568/a-woman-churning-milk-kalighat-painting-uttam-chitrakar/>

Industrialization replaced the cloth-backed paper scrolls with cheap rectangular sheets of mill paper, making these paintings inexpensive and affordable to the lower class. Thus, it became a popular form of art for the masses and was looked down upon by the Europeans and native elites, who called these *bazaar*⁵ art. These painters were not only depicting stories of gods and goddesses, but they also started responding to the chaos of an emerging modernity in Calcutta. The articulation of femininity and the representation of women in their temporal and spatial location was a common theme in these paintings. In Figure 3, we can see how a virtuous housewife or *grihalaxmi* (goddess of the hearth) has been represented. She is seen in a domestic setting, specifically in her kitchen, as we can tell from her proximity to utensils and her act of cooking

singing stories in return for food or money.

5 *Bazaar* in Bengali literally translates to market. But the term was also used to signify things that were cheap, low and classless. For example, *baazarer meye* was a common term used to refer to female sex workers.

(Victoria and Albert Museum 1875). She is wearing an opaque *saree* with her body fully draped and her head covered partially by the end of her *saree*. These depictions indicated how respectable women of the household as symbols of chastity had to internalize traits of servitude and show high moral standards. On the other hand, a courtesan's image seated on a chair with a hookah in her hand and a barber pricking her ear (See Figure 4), is a startling contrast to the image of conformity of the *bhadramahila* in Figure 3. She is wearing a translucent *saree* and her head is uncovered and bare. Her posture with one leg lifted over the chair depicts her lack of chastity and she also has a smile on her face unlike the *bhadramahila* who had her head facing downward (Victoria and Albert Museum 1875). The smile on her face and her "voluptuous" form was an expression of her aggressive sexuality and seductive nature (R. Chatterjee 2000). These paintings illuminate the anxiety around the overlapping tensions of gender and class— "about gender ambiguity being articulated in the language of sexual promiscuity— the ambiguity between the respectable women and the prostitute" (Chattopadhyay 2006, 262). Women from respectable families were restricted to the private domains of the household and burdened with different chores like cooking, cleaning, serving, or performing religious rituals. Even their education was confined to



Figure 4: Kalighat *pat* painting of a courtesan with barber. Kolkata 1875. Victoria and Albert Museum, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O72138/painting-unknown/>

the mansions so that the course content of what they were studying and their behavior could be controlled and surveilled (Chattopadhyay 2006). Their access to the public sphere remained heavily policed and curtailed. On the other hand, working-class women like sweepers, vendors, owners of stalls, street singers and dancers, maidservants or *naptenis* (women from the barber caste who used to decorate the feet of andarmahal women) were visibly present in the public view. In Figure 5, we can see a wealthy *babu* sitting on a *rickshaw* (a hand-pulled cart) with a courtesan (Victoria and Albert Museum 1875). She can be seen enjoying the changing urban landscapes of cars, dense, tall buildings, advertising banners and slogans in the busy streets of Calcutta. Her dress, mannerisms lacking any symbol of privacy and her indulgence with leisure (an activity otherwise seen as debilitating for respectable women) help us understand her distinct set of spatial practices as she negotiated with the city. Some women like widows of *kulin* Brahmans, who had nowhere to go, women who wanted to escape prostitution, prostitutes who after becoming old had lost their occupation or outcasts ascribed to the Vaishnava religion in Bengal, that specifically stressed on equality. These women would perform *keertans* (devotional singing) on the streets. These religious norms and practices allowed them a freedom of movement, an access to all corners

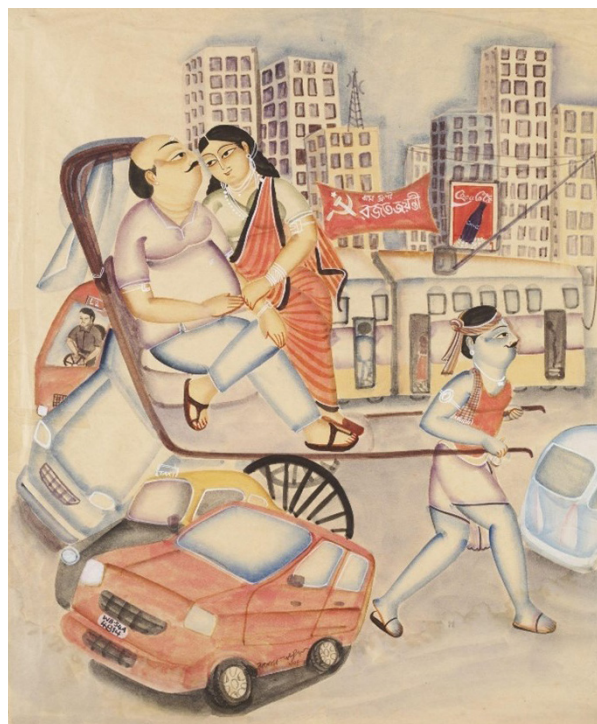


Figure 5: Kalighat *pat* painting. Scenes of modern-day Kolkata. Artist: Kalam Patua. Victoria and Albert Museum, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1241603/oh-kolkata-kalighat-painting-kalam-patua/>

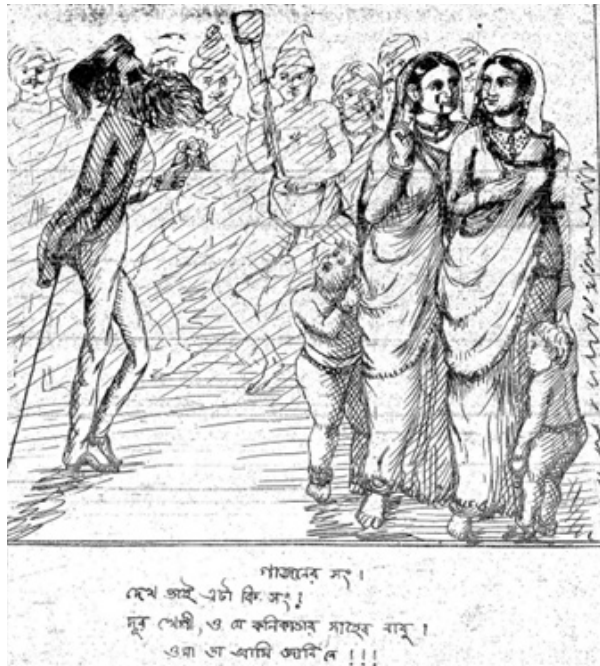


Figure 6: Gajaner Sawng. Women street performers in the everyday city. Basantak, Vol. 2, no. 11 (1874).

of society and certain liberty that was inaccessible to women from middle- and upper-class societies (Banerjee 1989a). Some of these women, who had learned how to read and write, started teaching the women and girls of the *bhadralok* (respectable) families and became the mediating link to the outside world for the women who were restricted to the household (Banerjee 1989a; Chattopadhyay 2006). Literary scholar, Swati Moitra discusses how these marginalized women and their labor had a significant role to play in the consumer economy around book distribution in colonial Bengal (Moitra 2017). She discusses how many of these women from lower castes were vendors and carried books from the Battala press to different parts of the city. These women were not subject to concerns about respectability and there are accounts which noted how they would read and sing to the inhabitants of the *antahpur* (or middle- or upper-class women confined to the domestic space) (Moitra 2017). In other instances, performances of the lower order like *kobigaan*, *panchali*, *keertan*, *jatra*, *khemta naach*, all of which were cultural practices like song, telling of folk stories or dances, enabled the minoritized women greater access to the public sphere (See Figure 6). The songs that these women sang captured the tensions of social, administrative and municipal corruption and wrongdoings (Ghosh 2016). In one such example an untouchable female scavenger (also called *methrani* in Bengali) from a boatmen's colony (*jelepara*), sings a song aimed at the Calcutta Municipality and their

corruption and through the song she threatens the high-caste educated Bengalis manning the lower order (Ghosh 2016). The song goes like:

*My name is Hira Methrani
I am the grandma of the Municipality
If anyone accuses us of being abusive
We quit work in unison
Our caste is very well bonded.
But the babus are different.
They shameless lick the half-eaten plates of
sahibs (Europeans)
Despite their gratuitous kicks.
And then they retort 'do not touch us methrani'
...Oh we will wed Brahmin priests
And marry of the Sens with the Deys
(Sur 1988, 77)*

Through this song, the untouchable sweeper mocks the social and political ambivalence of the respectable *babus*, who on one side were attached to strict rituals and stiff restraints of the caste order (and then they retort 'do not touch us methrani'), on the other hand, they emulated the colonizers and their lifestyles even to the extent of 'shamelessly licking their plates.' She is also seen exerting a sense of agency when she understands that the city critically depends on their labor, and she exclaims in a rather threatening tone that their caste is very well-bonded and might quit work in unison if they are constantly exploited. In *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*, a very popular satirical piece of literature written by Kaliprasanna Singha in 1862, the author gave a graphic account of complex everyday life in colonial Calcutta and also mocks elite society. While painting a picture of the city's sexual excesses at night and mapping sexually deviant women, the graphic novel describes in one instance how the *babus* (men from elite respectable families) engaged with the *nautch*⁶ girls or *khemtawalis* (See Figure 7):

Some babus even strip the khemtawalis before the dance begins! In some places the khemtawalis aren't given tips till they kiss! You can't mention these things aloud anywhere.. (Sinha 1991, 60)

These depictions clearly indicate the ambivalence of the Bengali nouveau rich who looked down upon the cultural practices of the lower groups in the public sphere, but they silently enjoyed their performances in private. It is also interesting to note how these women from the lower orders were constantly blurring the boundaries between public and private through their gendered performances in space.

The anxiety around the increasing visibility of women in

⁶ Nautch was a popular court dance mostly performed by women from lower castes, outcasts, widowed women or sex workers.



Figure 7: A nautch party with Europeans in Calcutta. Illustration by Sir Charles D'oyly. Victoria and Albert Museum (collection. vam.ac.uk)

urban public spaces was related to the presence of the 'public' women or the sex workers (colloquially called the prostitutes) in the streets of nineteenth century Calcutta. Their transgression of normative gender and sexual boundaries posed a significant threat to family and domesticity and became a cause of concern for the respectable reformers. In the first half of the nineteenth century, widowed women from elite or *kulin* brahmin families were engaged in this profession. However, in the latter half of the century, recurrent famines, destruction of artisanal trades, and discriminatory wages in agricultural practices, pushed women from lower castes and classes to take to this trade (Banerjee 2009; Chattopadhyay 2006).

Middle-class perceptions invariably also conflated a range of working-class and poor urban women with prostitutes ranging from housemaids and jute-mill and godown workers to *paanwalis*⁷... Gratification of lust and not income was seen as the primary motive in such clandestine

prostitution. (Ghosh 2016, 123)

It is interesting to note the tensions in the urban geography of these 'public' women in colonial Calcutta and how it changed as a result of changes in the socio-political realm. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these sex workers were not considered immoral; they were patronized by the Bengali rich landlords for their own needs and they continued to operate along medieval feudal patterns (Banerjee 2009). Palatial mansions of the rich were rented out as their owners moved to newer areas in the city and these women thus resided in the midst of dense residential clusters along principal streets of the city. According to one estimate, each palatial mansion housed over one hundred of these women (Minney 1919). There needs to be something said about the typology of the houses in which these women lived, which enabled a certain form of interaction with their clientele. The sexual workers residing in rented rooms of these aristocratic mansions could present themselves in the overhang verandahs or in the raised open porches of the houses (Ghosh 2016). So, even if these women were visible to their clients in

⁷ *Paanwalis* are female sellers of light betel leaf refreshments.

the public, their presence was restricted to the private domain of the house. Later in the nineteenth century, with economic and social changes brought about by the colonizers and the rise of the educated middle-class (*bhadralok*) consciousness brought about the criminalization of women in this profession. Viewing these women as threats to the sanctity and safety of middle-class homes, these women were resettled in residential pockets further south of the city (Banerjee 2009). In these residential pockets, with a changing urban morphology, the 'public women' took to walking the streets rather than soliciting from the houses and these conditions were viewed as distressing, infecting the inviolability of respectable urban life (Ghosh 2016). Later on, following the reinforcement of the Contagious Disease Act by the British in 1868 to control the spread of diseases among British soldiers who frequented Indian prostitutes, these women were further segregated to specific areas in the city (Banerjee 2009; Mitra 2020). Under this act, women had to register themselves and undergo periodical medical examination, they were forbidden to live and operate in certain areas of the city that were seen as 'respectable' (Banerjee 2009). Thus, colonialism, imperialism and racialization led to the gradual erasure of these 'public women' both spatially and temporally while pushing them to the urban fringes of the city.

NATIONALISM, MODERNISM, NEOLIBERALISM, AND THE SPATIAL EXPERIENCES OF THE COMMON WOMEN

As India moved toward independence, there was a new fervor for nationalism and the country's identity post-independence. The adoption of modernity was seen as critical for the nation to move forward in the path of progress. However, the Indian nationalist imagination was caught up in an ambivalent position. On one side, notions of technological progress, development, and scientific thinking was seen as instrumental in the nation-building project, on the other hand, adoption of a modernity premised on absolute Western frameworks was seen as threatening and leading to moral degeneracy. The fact that a Western modernity sought to speak in a universal mode of rationality, regulation, and control transcended all cultural specificities and in the context of India, 'being modern' was automatically associated with Western and thus inextricably linked with 'the colonial' (Chaudhuri 2012; Hodgson 2001). Middle-class social reform movements in the period post-independence were critical of the West and once again the women's question became central to the imagination of this newly independent nation. Indian women, specifically women from middle- and upper-classes were caught up in this tension between modernity and tradition. The 'new' ideal woman had to be a judicious mix of traditional qualities of domestic

skills, knowledge of religious rituals and practices, and modern abilities acquired through education and employment opportunities (Chaudhuri 2012; P. Chatterjee 1989). As Maitrayee Chaudhuri (2012) puts it eloquently, "the perfect Indian woman ought to be smart but not too smart, traditional but not too much" (282). The impact of modernities and globalities on cities and sexualities in the post-colonial city was also captured in many cinemas of that time period. For example, Satyajit Ray in the film *Mahanagar* released in 1963 chronicles the life of a middle-class family in Calcutta who were encountering a rough economic phase during that time. As it was becoming difficult for the sole breadwinner of the house, Subrata, to make ends meet during these turbulent times, his wife, Arati, had to give up her traditional and sheltered existence as a doting wife, mother, and daughter-in-law within the confines of the home and instead step out to work as a saleswoman in a sewing machine company. As Arati gains confidence and is seen asserting her independence in the city, we also see how her husband becomes insecure and withdraws his support from her new enterprise which includes subtle changes in her dress and attitude. When Arati casually applies lipstick, on insistence of her Anglo-Indian colleague, while returning home from work, she is censured by her husband and her boss who think that such behaviors impinge on the middle-class values of honor and respectability (See Figure 8). Along with this, it is also important to keep in mind that Arati's association with an 'Anglo' woman was met with resistance as the Anglo woman was not seen as a good woman because of her association with Western culture. Arati's emergence as a salaried, newly made over working woman as opposed to her traditional roles at home, is representative of the gendered nature and the disorienting effect of a new urbanism in Calcutta in the 1960s (Bose 2008) (See Figure 9). Simultaneously, non-normative behaviors and sexualities of women from lower class and caste occupied a liminal space in the city and came to be policed and contained through different state and community regulations. In another popular cinema *Meghe Dhaka Tara* of the 1960s in Calcutta by Ritwik Ghatak, captures the struggles of a working-class woman from a refugee family living in a *bustee* (informal settlement) in post-partition Bengal. Nita, the protagonist of the film, is shown to be struggling between patriarchal subjugation that she faces from society and her family (including her mother). She encounters prejudices as a working-class woman and is labelled as immoral even though she is the sole financial and emotional force rebuilding a family of six after facing precarities caused by partition. Such dichotomies continued to define the schisms between working-class common women and respectable women.

Modernization and, later on neoliberalization, led to the



Figure 8: Arati in the film Mahanagar seen wearing lipstick after being assisted by her Anglo-Indian colleague. <https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/indian-films-that-sparked-the-critic-in-me-satyajit-rays-mahanagar-is-the-definitive-feminist-classic-8809641.html>



Figure 9: Arati in the big city. <https://dailywelle.wordpress.com/2020/08/12/a-second-wave-analysis-of-satyajit-rays-mahanagar/>

refashioning of lifestyles, which in turn altered the urban fabric of the city. Spaces like shopping malls, department stores, cafes, restaurants, bars, discos, and offices started dotting the landscapes, which were a result of a desirable modernity. These masqueraded private spaces in the public realm, required the presence of middle and upper-class women in order to make modernization possible (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2009; Parikh 2018). On the other hand, women from lower class and castes were seen as outsiders in these spaces based on a “politics of disidentification” that was presupposed based on their class, identity, location, appearance, dress and their economic engagements (Anthias 2013, 123). Not only were these women excluded from partaking in these spaces of modernity, but they faced marginalization and lack of accessibility to basic social, cultural, and material capital needed for everyday sustenance.

People from lower socio-economic groups were either displaced from the city to distant locations in order to make space for the development of “world-class infrastructure” or the city itself became increasingly uninhabitable for them and as a result they moved to either derelict, residual spaces within the city or locations outside the city. Their everyday lives became synonymous with precarity, given that the settlements where they lived (mostly located in the urban fringes of the city, along railway tracks, riverbanks, etc.) lacked access to basic forms of infrastructure like running water, toilets, and electricity. These women mostly worked as domestic help, construction site workers, and informal vendors, etc. Thus, they faced further challenges in their daily commute to work and around their workplace. In an ethnographic study conducted by Somdatta Bhattacharya (2017) on the maidservants of Kolkata, she discusses the discontents of these women about the city’s public spaces. These women commuted very long distances on public transport and worked from morning to evening before they returned home. Bhattacharya (2017) notes the “spatial politics of rest or denial of spaces of rest or leisure in the city” for these women in-between their work often forced them to take refuge in the liminal landscapes of the city like shaded street corners, empty colonnaded parking spaces at the ground floor of apartment buildings, and street benches, etc (Bhattacharya 2017, 524). All these interstitial lived spaces occupied and produced by these women indicate the ways in which precarity governs their everyday spatial experiences while they navigate between the peripheries of home-work, inside-outside, and public-private. Furthermore, the inaccessibility of social, material, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) for these women and their spatial location in informal settlements, which are normalized as spaces of crime and misogyny, make conditions “both

naturally more prone to perpetuating violence and [the woman inhabitant] as a less legitimate victim” (Patil and Purkayastha 2015, 601).

CONCLUSION

Women from lower class and castes have been typically othered and deprived of their rights as legitimate citizens of the nation. Their existence at the margins of society (socially, historically and sometimes even geographically) makes them invisible actors in the production of modern, global cities. This research explores how these women negotiate preconceived worldviews, multiple forms of oppression, socio-cultural constructs and finds mechanisms to manipulate and adapt spaces that are structured to exclude them. It was shown how the position of these “common women” have been historically constructed in comparison to the respectable women from middle- and upper-classes. Through the survey of different literary texts, archival materials and documents my primary aim was to illuminate how class and caste becomes an important factor in shaping women’s spatial experiences. Exploring the life-worlds of these invisible women from lower class and caste in Kolkata also helps us understand how their non-normativity is used by the nation and the state to relationally construct what is proper and normative in a “respectable” Hindu nation in a global context.

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