Suspending the City, Silencing the Stranger

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One of the biggest calamities of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the city – the right to the city, the right to livelihood, the right to move, the right to being public. The city, historically, has not only emerged as the key location for the exchange of ideas and technologies in a globalizing world, but also the site to possibly earn a livelihood with some semblance of dignity, if not more. In the idea of the lockdown, especially in the harsh and strict way in which it was enforced in India, people were pushed into the insides of their homes, and 'stay home, stay safe' became a mantra and a greeting. But there were also people who had no 'inside' to immediately hide inside in, hide from that virus hunting you down; they got hunted by the authorities, and policies which in the insistence on one single formula – hide yourself – would not imagine any other possibility for health security, nor did it imagine that our lives are not simply about inside and outside. There were people that were precisely caught between this inside and outside – they were in nowhere-land – the migrants that occupied highways and state borders in inhuman conditions, walking the earth that was neither home, nor city, neither inside, nor outside, neither livelihood nor an iota of dignity. Those shoved inside their homes, we still do not know if family and home are safe completely and forever, if statistics of domestic violence, mental health, and sexual abuse are anything to go by.

One of the classic ways in which the city has been theorized, especially since the

nineteenth century and industrialization – is the binary of *Inside and Outside* – Home and World. The City becomes the World – the wide world, where strangers live and exist, and the Home is the family, the unit of social imagination often extended into the collective of the community. The outside is then the space of struggle for survival, whereas the Home is easily imagined as the haven of love and familial care, where the all heteronormative roles and actions are in order of social expectations, one is made to imagine. In more recent times in more ways than one, we have been impressed upon that the city is the space of un-safety – women molested, terrorist attacks, bombs blasting in trains and public places in toys, acid attacks, dengue, squatters, etc. An advertisement in the Mumbai local trains, following a set of serial bomb blasts, never leaves me – posters by the city police, sponsored by a water purifying systems company, telling you that the person next to you 'could be a terrorist' – in short, do not trust the people you share your life with, your everyday company of strangers, you saw as fellow-citizens, you associated with as fellow-public, and sharing the everyday life of struggle – could now suddenly be dangerous strangers! Your sense of the collective is now threatened by the virtue of untrustworthiness, expanded in the name of security and safety. In contrast, family – the heteronormative structure, with the head of the family, motherly warmth, and all that baggage of a conservative and patriarchal society is imagined as the automatic, and default haven for each and every conforming heteronormative human life. But is the city such a simple binary of *Inside and Outside*? In the pandemic, governance structures clearly found this the easy way to handle a crisis of sustained inadequacies – especially in places like India, where lockdowns have extended for long without much imagination of alternatives.

Jane Jacobs in her wonderful book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* points out how one of the key definitions of a city is the notion of living amidst strangers, the stranger is the unknown yet familiar entity identifiable in the estranged life of the city. To be strangers is nature of urban publics, but being strangers is not being enemies or threats in any automatic equation – strangers allow for a sense of independence in the crowded city, strangers are independent beings. The city is large and big, unrecognizable in many ways, but it organizes itself into smaller clusters and neighbourhoods – neighbourhoods of living and work, travel and shared biographies of struggling through the urban

everyday. Every stranger has her neighbourhood, and his neighbourhood – we just do not know of it, and we do not need to know it all the time, like in a familial expectation. But strangers in their strangerly associations build urban narratives. As often, these stranger-associations shape bonds of friendship and familiarity, even a familial sense, free from the burdens of conservative institutions such as marriage or blood-ties over generations. The city then becomes the space of negotiating one's life everyday, and the possibility to do that on one's own terms. Two amongst many storytellers of Bombay and Mumbai have often spoken about the negotiated lives of city-dwellers between the street and the home; Sadaat Hasan Manto and the many spaces from the bed in one room tenements to the eateries of the laboring classes, in which he narrates his characters and talks about the multiplicity and the multivalence of urban and life's spaces; the other Rohinton Mistry, especially in the novel *Family Matters* talks about the protagonist shuttling literally, as well as metaphorically between family and the space of the outside, where a 'man' is supposed to make ends meet, between hopes and reality, between trains and hawkers. Often our living quarters – be the Chawl or the housing society, the Moholla or the Colony, the Baug or the Wadi, they are often spaces and structures that embody the inside and the outside within its own behaviors and routines. The theorization of the strict inside or interior, and the outside or the world, never really existed on the ground in any form. Many levels of thresholds and interstitial spaces, or bridging routines have shaped the physical and the psychological map of cities like Bombay/Mumbai; as the sociologist Simmel would title his important essay – "The Mental Life of the Metropolis" – the city has a mind that often cheats, more than obeys its physical ordering of walls and gateways, doors and corridors.

As more and more we have realised that the city has a mind of its own, more and more we have created gated hideouts in the city, in the name of safety, in the name of protecting dietary preferences, cursing the city for what a mess it is – we either recede within rings of walled security gardens, or aspire to rise into the clouds, or even better take a boat to the fantasyland called Alibaug. And now, we totally lock the city out of our lives, blaming the virus. Is the city dangerous, or is it that we have over decades not invested in cleaner and equitable living environments, organized with primary health facilities and hygiene routines? Is it the fault of the city that real estate has been allowed to decide on the

natural and human habitat balance? Is it the fault of the city that rather than investing and strengthening our public transport system we have pampered development projects that encourage more private travelling? But the city is chaotic, messy, dirty, squalor-ed, and we good people are not to be blamed – it is the city, and its population of unsettled populations – unsettled because their earning will not allow them a home, or a roof, or their lives are organized between cycles of agricultural seasons and construction industry or other industrial and labour markets – organized between cycles of migrations, rather than settled in protected homes.

The architect Kamu Iyer, in his book *Boombay* speaks of how a city must be judged by the way it treats its poor and underprivileged, and as a nation we have failed miserably on this count. A rare but critical occasion such as this pandemic is actually telling us today how maybe an excessive emphasis on planning static spatialities has not helped us, and rather a focus on understanding the cultures and life-patterns of cities could have given us better capabilities to manage the city under emergency and crisis. Many theses study the city for its cultural and psychological structures, for the sense of urban experience more than urban planning, who do not believe that the city is a physical entity any more than it is a psychic and ephemeral entity of networks and life-patterns not visible to the naked eye trained only to read the obvious physicalities. These theses actually emphasize that we have not understood the city beyond development, real estate, planning, and such physical modes of reading and language of discourse – at levels of policy and governance but also our impressions. If governing agencies and prime decision makers would not have imagined that the lockdown is a simple decision between being safe behind your home door or being outside it – naïve, but true we would not have made countless people suffer indignity – inside and outside!

We lack at all levels – daily experience, as well as at the states of policy-making and governance decisions – a basic understanding of the city, as an entity that is *Kinetic* and *Open* as against a closed-system or a static body – bringing in here two seminal theses, *Kinetic City* by Rahul Mehrotra and *Open City* by Richard Sennett. The *Kinetic* or *Open* city does not play much on the inside-outside binary, but they open the conversation on the dynamic nature of the city. And then the

book *Alice in Bhuleshwar: Navigating a Mumbai Neighbourhood* indicates, the city is a labyrinth of negotiations across time and geography, layers of inside and outside and all in-between. The city exists as a deep structure of networks and lives in motion, and it exists beyond its municipal or any other governing limits; these insatiable insides, and its deep interiors can be horrific for those suffering different kinds of overt or subtle forms of bullying or loneliness within the family home. While anonymity in the city, stranger-type existence in the crowd, allowed a solace from pressures of normativity such as gender, class, or caste behavior patterns; compliance to hierarchical pressures within a patriarchal or emotional family structure, cutting out the individual human being's options of organising one's life outside of 'home'. The city's public places – whether to strolling and loitering singles, or couples sneaking away a spot, or friends and colleagues sharing moments of relationship negotiation – has been the crucible of negotiating privacy as well as shared lives outside home. What we are losing at will here is the potential of public life and public spaces to shape the individual as an independent thinking and behaving body within the frameworks of humanity and citizenship; the independent body walking the city and having the possibility to shape one's own space outside of family and outside of work.

The city is the essential space where the citizen and resident shapes herself/himself as well as the political sphere. It is important to remember in this lockdown that since mid-December, up until the lockdown is enforced and curfews are spread out for a medical emergency, the cities in India had emerged as the most vibrant spaces of public discourse and public debate, shaping voices and arguments on the fundamentals of what it means to be a citizen in India, and calling for a democracy of spaces in the name of India's Constitution and the idea of India as its founding voices gave us. Public spaces, places with a voice, and people with physical presence, emerged in the contemporary Indian city making the city a vibrant space for politics and the debate on human rights, human dignity, and the imagination of citizenship within a multicultural India, a parliamentary democracy, demanding that voices be heard, and reminding that voices will speak between elections, and for that the city provided the space, place, and stage. What began with student protests within campuses, took form in the city with multiple voices joining in, city after city in India followed, and cities across the world spoke in support and unison. The world and the argumentative

Indian connected via cities and their networks. Today, the spaces of the city stand silenced and quieted. As much as the digital space has provided many avenues of shaping new kinds of public discourse spaces and arenas, the physical space of the city brings forth the citizen into a particular kind of centre-stage. The physical and the digital in fact have joined hands in producing logics of the public in more new ways than one, and this potential needs to be understood as fast as it is producing itself.

The city is an idea we need to invest in actively; not as the binary of Home and not as the binary of Rural, but the City as the site of human civilization: for the exchange of struggles, negotiations between imaginations, and the power to connect beyond parochial logics of limiting conservatism or bordered geographies. We also need to invest in the idea of the city as the site of human endeavors, the site of a struggle that is local but voicing ideas and arguments across cultures, boundaries, and borders which is the shaping of publics. The public exists in layers of insides and outsides, and to understand how these layers have been damaged, and where they probably also reinforced themselves will be important to our immediate futures – as histories, as projects of recovering the collective, the voices and bodies of people in various geographies of spaces.

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