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Production, Contestations, Negotiations, Trade-off, Claim-making

Contested spaces: The Production of Indian streets through Negotiations, Trade-off and Claim-making in Ahmedabad

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ABSTRACT

Streets in India consist of dynamic negotiation and contestations in the production process. The essay reflects on how the street spaces are claimed, reclaimed, and shaped through these contestations and negotiations between different actors involved in the production process. State policies, private interests, and the needs of everyday users create conflict, leading to interactions that shape the streets. This essay explores how automobile-centric planning and urban imagery, taking forward the private interests and state agendas, excludes other actors and their requirements. There has been a utilitarian simplification of the street space due to the state's vision and the private elite's interest. Drawing upon Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space* and employing a qualitative approach centred on empirical cases from Ahmedabad, this essay identifies the conflicts among different actors, their needs and how they contest, negotiate, claim and reclaim their space. It contributes to the debates on urban governance and the right to the city while recognising the need for street space beyond the corridor of movement for social and economic purposes.



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Introduction

Walking down the Dr Vikram Sarabhai Road in Ahmedabad, I encountered metal barricades that divided the street into three parallel parts. Placed near the crossroads at Panjrapol, those barriers indicated the addition of a flyover in the city. After a few days, before Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) could extend this barricading, a citizens' group filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the high court, questioning its need. This was accompanied by a silent protest, as signs on the trees stated their importance and advocated against their removal. On the same street, vendors negotiated for space with officials to produce their space for evening business. These negotiations are crucial to avoid their exclusion from the space and support their daily needs. It would determine who would have their claim on the street space.

These two incidents reflect a reality, Indian streets are not just a movement conduit but a site of contestations, negotiations and claim-making from different actors. Urban governance, infrastructure projects, city development, and everyday negotiations from different actors shape the production of streets. Streets are arenas of social relations, political agendas, cultural values, and economic struggles of other actors, setting up varying and often conflicting requirements for street space. Competing priorities and claims of the state authorities, planners, elites, vendors, pedestrians, and other actors over street space lead to contestation and negotiation.

These conflicts lead to the exclusion of actors and trade-offs of activities. Building on these initial observations, the essay unpacks the complexity of Indian street dynamics. It examines how contestations, negotiations, and claim-making among diverse actors shape the production of street spaces in Ahmedabad, focusing on the interplay of state policies, elite interests, and everyday user practices.

Methodological Approach and Theoretical Lens

Street spaces are argued to be produced through social relations, power structures and other everyday human practices. These street spaces are examined as perceived space, representing everyday practices; conceived spaces, representing the planned and authoritative visions; and lived spaces, representing the contested experiences of the users (Lefebvre, 1991). The essay reflects how the conceived space, produced through a process driven by the state and elite interests, interacts and is challenged by the lived and perceived spaces, produced by the everyday practices of the diverse users. It will further investigate trade-offs which prioritise specific users for the conceived spaces, and the negotiations from excluded users to claim and produce lived or conceived spaces.

The analytical framework is built around the literature review spanning urban theory, urban planning, and social science, supported by relevant policy documents. On-site observations of street activities on key corridors, semi-structured interviews with street vendors and urban planners, and critical analysis of urban interventions in Ahmedabad and policy documents form the base for what the essay argues. These methods reflect the spatial dynamics at play, capturing the interplay of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces (Lefebvre, 1991) through the everyday practices of street users and the authoritarian visions of state and elite actors.

Production of Street Space: Social, Informal, and Political

Public spaces like streets, parks, plazas or any other corner of open space, when designed at the correct scale, can hold together activities of different nature and intensities and create opportunities for people to connect with the surrounding environment (Gehl, 2011; Duarte, 2017). They also allow them to connect and interact with other people, forming a lived space (Lefebvre, 1991). These interactions, as Gehl (2011) mentions, could be as simple as passive activities like seeing someone or hearing someone, or they could get as complex or elaborate as a political strike. These lived spaces, or the 'terrain', are the spaces where, as per Lefebvre (1991), the social life does not just unfold, but the space itself becomes part of that social life. The streets in India are such lived spaces where people can enter social life (DeCerteau, 1988) through different social, economic or political activities.

Indian streets are a constant juxtaposition of activities and elements that are not planned to be in the street space. These juxtapositions give Indian streets a unique character (Edensor, 1998). Streets in India are built out of the chaos formed by these juxtapositions (Ahuja, 1997). Over the years, the chaos became a rhythmic necessity as it provided

people with their daily needs and concerns (Burte et al., 2023), forming the lived space. These daily needs of the space conflict with modern ideals (Anjaria, 2012).

Activities like vending occupy street space to fulfil their daily needs and those of other actors who depend on them for affordable products and services. The presence of street vendors, although they benefit different actors, is often excluded from the street space, and their citizenship is questioned (Anjaria & Rao, 2014; Banerjee, 2023). Street vending contributes to the lived spaces formed on the street. However, this production of space often clashes directly with the space conceived by the state and the elite, leading to constant contestation.

The streetscapes, which, as per Edensor (1998), provide us with a better experience than the streets of the West, are a problem for the elite as well as the authorities as they deviate from the urban aesthetic that they are striving for (Anjaria, 2012). They dream of a modern, global, world-class landscape that reflects a particular aesthetic. It is driven by their knowledge of street requirements, which they enforce through their power. The state and elites have created a knowledge of the need for an image and road space for private automobiles (Joshi, 2023; Anand, 2006; Gambetta & Bandyopadhyay, 2013), reflected by the constant rise in flyovers in cities like Ahmedabad. This has led to the street's authoritarian simplification (Scott, 1998). The state, through its agencies, actively engages in the production of space, producing a conceived space, which it considers essential to its development needs. This vision often prioritises vehicular flow and 'world-class' urban imagery. Hence, the social reality constantly conflicts with how the state produces the streets, making them morally compromised spaces (Chakrabarty, 2002).

The state's narrow vision, avoiding the cities' other social and economic concerns (Joshi, 2023; Kuttler & Jain, 2012), connects and disconnects the population in the city (Anand, 2006). Hence, these projects have been critiqued for being showcase projects rather than systemic change (Bhan, 2016) despite the growth in infrastructure. In Ahmedabad, the redevelopment of the street from the airport circle to the Indira Bridge is similar to a showcase project, reflecting an image that the state aspires to. There are several sculptures, art pieces, and decorative lights that enhance the image of the street. However, its junctions do not have space for pedestrians to cross. Hence, the movement of motorised vehicles has improved; however, it remains a concern for non-motorised transit and pedestrians.

Production of Street space: Automobile-driven and Political Infrastructure

Cities, with their constant economic growth, require an urban infrastructure to perform their required functions. However, in many Indian cities, these infrastructural developments have posed significant challenges as they have not attained the necessary

quality (Kumar et al., 2020). Initiatives like the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JnNURM) and the Smart Cities Mission have focused on the development of urban infrastructure to ensure a better economic infrastructure. A key aspect of these policies has been the development of civic infrastructure within identified cities. Improving infrastructure such as roads, flyovers, parking areas, and mass rapid transit systems has been prioritised under these policies, reflected in the funds allocated towards it – 25.6% nationally and over 45% in Ahmedabad (Kumar et al., 2020). This reflects a mobility-centred push of infrastructural development by the state. This reflects an authoritarian simplification (Scott, 1998) of an urban environment, conceived to push a specific agenda forward.

Within the concerns around the expansion of urban spaces, traffic and circulation have emerged as a key focal point, which has given rise to numerous transit-oriented projects in Indian cities (Gopakumar, 2020). Cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Ahmedabad are constantly dealing with severe traffic congestion, where travel times have often exceeded the desired standard by 15-20 minutes as reflected by the TomTom index. Across the different socio-economic strata, from the elite to the poor, there has been a belief that private vehicles are a symbol of social status beyond their transit capacity (Joshi, 2014; Fernandes, 2004). This has been further fuelled by the state's incentives towards automobile industries, reflected through projects such as the TATA Nano, while on the other side, ensuring availability of easy loans for purchasing private vehicles (Joshi, 2014). Collectively, these have intensified the demand for private automobiles and their spaces for movement on streets, further cementing a spatial practice.

Cars, in Indian cities, have created a quasi-privatised realm on the street for themselves and their users (Gopakumar, 2020). The elites have advocated and claimed significant road space for themselves. However, against this, there has been a notable expansion of public transit, especially around mass transportation. Cities have focused on developing public transport, reflected by the implementation of metros and Bus Rapid Transit Systems (BRTS) (Hoque et al., 2012). However, these conceived spaces have often fallen short against the everyday mobility requirements of the urban poor, who also find these transit options unaffordable (Joshi, 2023). This challenge is often compounded by the lack of adequate pedestrian infrastructure and shrinking space for non-motorised vehicles. This effectively reduces access to lived spaces for the urban poor, making it challenging to fulfil their daily needs.

Through urban renewal missions, BRTS projects have also been added to cities like Ahmedabad, providing transit facilities to the city. However, these have often developed in isolation from the rest of the city's urban development and intermediate public transport. This lack of integration has only added to the traffic congestion and private automobile focus through increased lanes and flyovers. This state's focus on the private automobile movement and its inclination towards elites is also visible in decisions like not allowing public transport, including autorickshaws, on the riverfront road parallel to the

Sabarmati riverfront development in Ahmedabad. This is despite the public spaces running parallel to the road and upcoming developments, which become inaccessible to actors without private vehicles. This reflects an instance where a conceived space supposed to convey a world-class image makes the public spaces and other developments inaccessible to the citizens without private vehicles. This actively shapes who can perform specific spatial practices while negating specific groups from their lived space.

Beyond the large-scale transit development projects, constant addition of flyovers in the cities reflects an inclination towards enhancing the continuity and speed for private vehicles (Ghate & Sundar, 2013). This expansion of urban infrastructure is directly linked to the elite aspirations of transforming Indian cities into world-class cities (Anand, 2006; Goldman, 2011), further reinforcing the conceived space of the state. This has led to a contestation of the street space between the state, elite and the other stakeholders of the street who are excluded from the produced spaces.

Contestations, Negotiations, Trade-offs and Claim-making

The growing economy and its pressure on the streets have constantly increased private vehicles (Joshi, 2023). Hence, we see a constant rise in flyovers and widening roads to ensure smooth vehicular movement away from the 'discontinuous ebb and flow of street congestion' (Gambetta & Bandyopadhyay, 2013). While widening the road and adding flyovers benefits motorised vehicles, these infrastructures deplete the facilities for people walking or cycling as they consume more road space.

Considering the case of Ahmedabad, the urban poor generally prefer to cycle or walk to their places of work as they can hardly afford the cost of public transport (Joshi, 2023). While the BRTS was being installed in the city, an opportunity was opened to create a space for cyclists and pedestrians. A small section of the corridor was designed for cyclists, but it was soon decided that the cycle tracks were not utilised, and hence, the corridor was never extended (Joshi, 2023). Along with cycle lanes, wider footpaths were also made, reflected in some stretches of the BRT corridor. However, these were removed along with the cycle lane after the demand for more space for movement and parking (Mahadevia et al., 2013). Cyclists have had to reclaim space on the carriageway, leading to further conflicts. Even the exclusivity of the bus lane received pushback from motorists, who were backed by politicians (Joseph et al., 2024). However, that pushback was averted by the then-chief minister's will.

The informal economy also contributes significantly to the dynamics of street space. Street vendors blur the boundaries between public and private when they use public street space for private gain (Gupta, 1995) and create confusion between public and

private. Hence, they refuse to become the ideal citizens of the 'bourgeois order' (Chakrabarty, 2002). Therefore, when the streets overflow, vendors, also referred to as encroachers by the elite and middle class (Patil, 2023), are one of the first actors who are asked to vacate the streets (Chakrabarty, 1991) and essentially move away from their livelihood. Vendors are not considered the 'proper citizens' who can have legitimate claims on the space (Chatterjee, 2004), leading to contestations on the street space. Through these practices, citizenship for the marginalised is constantly 're-oriented, re-negotiated, re-territorialised and re-scaled' (Holston & Appadurai, 1999; Purcell, 2003; Desai & Sanyal, 2012; Fernandes, 2004).

Banerjee (2023), in her paper, also talks about the anxiety of the middle class regarding street vendors. In Mumbai, street vendors challenge the expectations of the middle class, who prefer cleaner, broader, and beautiful streets, reflecting an interest in clearing them from the road. They contest the middle class's rationality to reclaim the street space they need. Even the urban civic activists, through organisations like Advance Locality Management in Mumbai, worked predominantly on urban beautification, constantly pushing for removing encroachments (Anjaria & Rao, 2014). These activists have become the 'Stewards' of the city streets (Anjaria, 2009). Due to this exclusion, the vendors are forced to negotiate informally with the state through bribes and other means to reclaim the street space for their survival.

Although the Street Vendors Act of 2014 has allowed street vendors to participate in some decision-making processes, its formal application has been a struggle. This is reflected in Ahmedabad, where the street vending committee participates in the decision-making process with the AMC. However, the participation is tokenistic, where decisions are only conveyed to them, forcing them to resort to informal practices to negotiate and reclaim their space.

In the informal realm, beyond the vendors, the haphazard parking, either on the footpath or on the carriageway, leads to another set of contestations. These parked vehicles occupy street space meant for walking, driving or, in some cases, street vendors. These vehicles informally claim street spaces by encroaching on footpaths and carriageways (Joshi, 2023). However, despite their space consumption, these parked vehicles are viewed in the same light as street vendors (Anjaria & Rao, 2014).

This way, the street space is constantly produced and reproduced through the contention, negotiations, and claim-making of different actors, leading to the exclusion of some actors and the trade-offs of activities. It is shaped by the varying needs of these actors and their push towards achieving those needs

Conclusion

The contestation and negotiation in the street space of Indian cities reflect the embedded conflicts between actors like the state, private elite, pedestrians, vendors, and other actors. The growing infrastructure, which supports the economic growth of the cities, is often lopsided as it supports motorised movements while trading off the non-motorised. Often, they exclude or displace actors like pedestrians and street vendors to create seamless motorised movement. Contestation over street spaces – lived and conceived – reflects the competing visions and needs of the different actors, which also shape urban development. The right to the street space, hence, is a constantly contested terrain where citizenship is negotiated through everyday practices.

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