

The (Un)sanitary City: Infrastructure and the Body in Kolkata

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In her 2006 documentary, *Q2P*,¹ Paromita Vohra asks a question that serves as the entry point into this paper, and enables me to branch off and enquire into what constitutes a city? What does the map of a city look like, if one takes into account its sanitation? How do everyday practices of sanitation, controlling, modifying and therefore constituting metabolic realities, make the imagination of the city possible? What are the margins of sanitation, who occupy these margins and who are pushed right outside of the boundary of the sanitary city? Vohra asked, “What would a city that took women’s needs seriously, look like”? While we can merely begin to imagine the answer to this question, more than a decade on, I propose some more questions, some more stakeholders who would complicate our understanding of sanitation and the city.

Women of course, as Vohra shows us, but woman is not a monolithic category. How does my experiences of sanitation vary from that of a domestic worker, a pavement dweller and a transwoman who collects money at traffic junctions? What about the sanitation worker (who, in Kolkata, is often an internal migrant) and the women who sell their wares at busy market-spaces? What are the different institutional approaches to sanitation, and how are human bodies and embodied subjectivities arranged around them?

I will begin by outlining the theoretical framework that informs this paper. Inspired by Foucault, Elizabeth Grosz² enquires into the ‘constitutive and mutually mutually defining relations between bodies and cities’. She thinks of the city as one of the crucial social factors in the constitution of corporeality (242), providing the order and ‘organisation that automatically links’ the affluent and the rich with the poor and the vagrant (243). The animate, concrete organisation of flesh and nerves, that the body is, is however, incomplete without the functioning of the ‘micro technologies of power’ (243). Various disciplinary practices (ala Foucault) ‘produces’ the body, ‘including the coordination and integration of bodily functions...so that it becomes an integral part of or position within a social network’ (244). By city, Grosz understands that

complex and interactive network’ that brings together ‘economic and informational flows, power networks, forms of displacement, management and political organisation, interpersonal, familial and extra-familial social relations, and an aesthetic/ economic organization of space and place to create a semi permanent but ever changing built environment or milieu (244).

In a straight forward narrative, the city is a result of the work of bodies, and of various conceptual and reflective processes. Designers design the city, labour brings it into

¹ *Q2P*. Directed by Paromita Vohra. Parodevi Pictures. 2006.

² Grosz, Elizabeth. “Bodies-- Cities”. *Spac, Tiem and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*. Allen and Unwin, 1995. 241-253.

existence—among the several problems inherent in this narrative, following Grosz, let me focus on the one that posits a causal relationship between the body and the city, the body is the cause and the city is the effect (245). Instead, Grosz proposes a model for the relation between cities and bodies ‘which sees them, not as megalithic total entities, distinct identities, but as assemblages, collection of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages...’ (246).

At this juncture, it will be useful to enquire into Desai et al³.’s research about open defecation practices in Mumbai slums. While open or any form of defecation is not the focus in this paper, Desai provides a powerful critique of established, governmental ways of thinking about sanitation and its infrastructures, in the context of an urban metropolis. Unlike the 2017 book *Where India Goes: Abandoned Toilets, Stunted Development and the Costs of Caste* that tried to find answer to India’s open defecation ‘problem’ in rural Madhya Pradesh, Desai et al take the fact of open defecation in urban Mumbai to point at the ways in which ‘bodies and infrastructure [are] related in the contexts of severe urban poverty and exploitation’ (98). Instead of kowtowing to established attitudes positing open defecation as ‘public nuisance’, the authors describe the dystopic reality where ‘private bodily acts’ are constituted as against the well- being of the city (99). They investigate the daily routines and rhythms of a precarious population, navigating between middle class and governmental disgust, trying to maintain bodily dignity, at the juncture of public and private. For them, the everyday embodied materialities are key to understanding open defecation in modern India in all its complexities.

Taking queue from Grosz and Desai, I also seek to understand the (un)sanitary city, as it emerges through everyday embodied practices of people, through the ways in which their narrativise their experiences and existence and their notions of belonging into the city they live in.

But first, I need to locate myself within this literal landscape and the imaginative topography of subjectivities that I seek to map. As a cis-woman with sanitation access both at home and at work (although the access at work is a new development), and a fair amount of disposable income, I am mostly at ease moving within the city, safe in the knowledge that most of the spaces I inhabit and am likely to visit would afford access to toilets/ bathrooms that I deem fit to be used. In other cases, when a long day is to be spent on the road, I try to find a way to be close to a shopping mall that is likely to have clean toilets, or eat at expensive places that are expected to have the same. But, I also take certain precautionary measures ahead of a long day on the road, limit my fluid intake to a bare minimum (harking back to the days spent travelling to Haldia, when the first drop of water passing my lips since morning would be the one at after reaching Haldia) and being careful with what I eat. In my mind, I have often likened it to a rape schedule⁴, the umbrella term for the myriad ways in which cis-women, transwomen and transmen, and a handful of cis-men decide on the routes to travel, the times of travel and other everyday strategies aimed at minimising the risk of sexual assault. My sanitary schedule minimises the chance of having to use, what I would deem an ‘unclean’ utility. A sanitary schedule, as Desai et al

³ Desai, Renu, Colin MacFarlane and Stephen Graham. “The Politics of Open Defecation: Informality, Body and Infrastructure in Mumbai.” *Antipode*, vol.47, no. 1, 2015, pp. 98-120.

⁴ Nair, Sujatha. “I Am On A Rape Schedule.” *iYouth Ki Awaz*. March 2, 2017.

<https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2017/03/i-am-on-a-rape-schedule/>. Accessed 13th August, 2017.

inform us, operates at the juncture of private bodily acts that governments seek to bring under its jurisdiction.

Sanitary Schedule and the techniques of ‘passing’:

A sanitary schedule is also something to be learnt, following Marcel Mauss, a technique of the body. A technique that is learnt, and modified over time. Nowhere is it more apparent, than in the narratives of transpersons. My position as a cis-woman immediately puts me on a privileged position with respect to many others: in the case of a public toilet, I can spend whatever meagre amount that the utility requires, and I do not have to encounter dysphoria when using the strictly gender segregated public utilities. Gender dysphoria, especially in the instance of needing to use public utilities is extremely strong, but attached with it are questions of dignity and safety. As Aryan Somaiya puts it:

It's simple for you all to choose where to go! How to do? Where to do? For people like us, yes Transgenders, is not jus the toilet but the whole process of performance of how and where and what to do! It is a privilege to be born in the body that aligns your gender! We have no space, well safe space to even make such a privilege choice.! I am always worried about to pass off, security and safety before making such a choice! I am vulnerable to attacks of I may get caught, can be raped, bullied, physically assaulted no matter which toilet I use, high class spaces like malls or the public toilets.

Every min I have to make a choice, from which toilet to use, men or women? Stand or sit? Inside or jus there with 100s showing off their sizes.! Do I have a mustache? Do I look of my age? Body hair? Height, weight, size, all of this to just go and pee! Everytime I m helpless and disheartened when I see myself stand just outside the binary doors and calculate the illusioned privileges that are given to me!"⁵

Safety is a key concern—resulting in most transpeople, irrespective of their self identified gender choosing to use women’s toilets, as Karthik Bittu puts it. There at least, one can hope, one will not be sexually assaulted. But in the instances when women standing in the queue or inside the toilet raise objection, men who are usually the caretakers of public utilities, are brought into play, forcing, dragging transmen and women alike, out, and at times handing them over to the police. For transmen, public utilities pose yet another problem. Many of them cannot or do not wish to use the urinals, and often public utilities aimed at men do not have individual stalls. The fear of not being able to ‘pass’ and therefore be subjected to violence is also stronger. However, if one enters into a men’s utility, then walking out and entering the women’s section is simply not an option.

In a group discussion, members of the Association of Transgender/Hijra in Bengal (AT/HB) brought up the complex everyday negotiations that form the everyday sanitary reality for transpeople. They also pointed at the class aspect to access and to resistance, as well as the role that being able to pass, as masculine or feminine, played in access. Baishali, whose pre-transition name was Bikash, is a 31 year old NGO worker, who also earns her living by participation in collecting money at the birth of children, or by doing *badhai*. A student of

⁵ *Why Loiter? Pune*. “Aryan Somaiya shares what accessing a public toilet means to a transperson.” Facebook. 13 August 2017. 9.05 a.m. Accessed 14 August 2017.

Chakraberia High School, Baishali often tried to use the ‘ladies’s’, but wasn’t allowed to, till that time in class VIII when she created a ruckus and the head master acquiesced. Before that often, the ‘ladies’ will be under lock and key, she believes, to deter her from using them. A ruckus seems to be what determines whether, out on the road, travelling across the city for pleasure or for work, she will be allowed into the women’s toilet. She recalls one night during Durgapuja, while trying to enter the women’s toilet, she was accosted by some men coming out of the men’s, pulling and grabbing her, trying to get her into their car. Only a collective ruckus by her friends could make them run away. At other times, in queues, relatively affluent women remark derisively, “What are you, that you are entering our bathroom?” It then is a question of shouting till she is allowed entry, a technique that both Babli (Bablu) and Bhumi (Debashish) also reported employing.

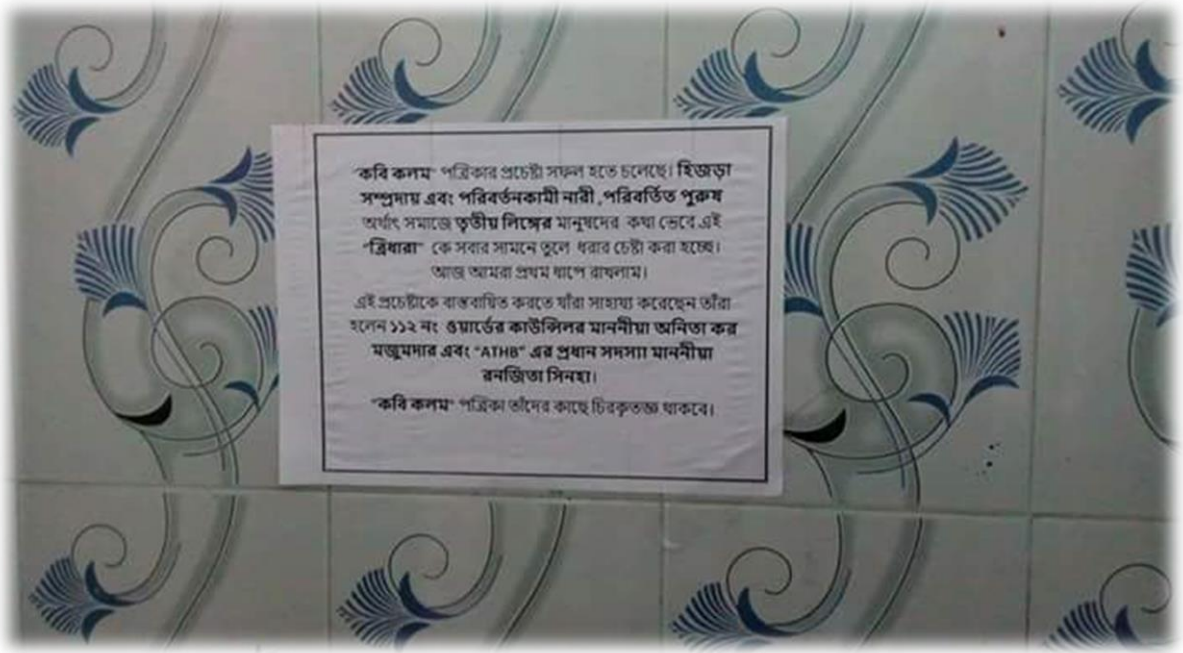
Bhumi dropped out of college after her first year as she wasn’t allowed to write the exams due to lack of attendance. At school and then at college, she recalls barely ever visiting the toilets, and to ensure that, not drinking water—a practice that she still continues. At school, in the boys’ toilet she was repeatedly beaten up, assaulted, but the teachers never came to her aid. The teachers would intervene only if she was publicly shamed, not if it happened in the privacy of the toilet. Later, at college (Shyamaprasad College), other women using the ladies’ raised objections about her presence there—resulting in her never visiting the toilet after that. In malls, other women using the toilet often laugh at her, at public toilets men (including the caretaker) stare and snigger. A toilet for ‘third gender’, is what Bhumi sees as the potential solution. Babli and Baishali agree, and they seemed to believe that there are others states in India that already have ‘third gender’ bathrooms in place in public utilities. Just last week, a literary journal called “Kabi Kalam” in Kolkata, stuck posters and appeals to the users of public toilets in ward no 112 of Kolkata Municipality, requesting them to desist from making rude comments to people of the third gender. To show that these toilets should be deemed as safe spaces for people of the third gender, they also stuck stickers called “Tridhara”, with humanoid figures traditionally used on toilet entrances—with the crucial difference that in this case these humanoids bear marks of both genders. Of course, the positioning of transpeople as ‘third gender’ has a long and contested history, however it is interesting that this public utilities in Kolkata constitute the first place where such a citizen’s imitative is launched. [Images 1, 2 3]

জনগণের উদ্দেশ্যে কিছু কথা

মানুষ নিজেদের উন্নত জীব বলে মনে করে। আর আমরা একত্রে যেখানে বাস করি সেই ঘরকে বলে সমাজ। সেখানে ভিন্ন মানুষের উপস্থিতি লক্ষ্য করা যায়। আর এই সমাজেই বাস করে হিজড়া সম্প্রদায় ও পরিবর্তনকামী নারী এবং পরিবর্তিত পুরুষ যাদের আমরা তৃতীয় লিঙ্গ বলে জানি। আইনত তাঁরা সামাজিক মর্যাদা পেলেও, সমাজেরই মানুষ এখনও তাদের অবহেলা করে। সুযোগ সুবিধা থেকে তাঁরা এখনো বঞ্চিত। আইন শুধু মর্যাদা দেয় কিন্তু মানসিকতার পরিবর্তন নিজেদের করতে হয়। তাই "কবি কলম" আপনাদের কাছে অনুরোধ করছে দয়া করে এনাদের উদ্দেশ্যে কোনো রকম বিরূপ মন্তব্য করবেন না। আসুন আমরা সবাই মিলে এক সুন্দর সমাজ গড়ে তুলি। তার জন্য আপনাদের সহযোগিতা একান্ত কাম্য।

ধন্যবাদ
(কবি কলম)

এই প্রচেষ্টাকে বাস্তবায়িত করতে আমাদের পাশে
আছেন ১১২নং ওয়ার্ডের কাউন্সিলর
মাননীয় অনিতা কর মজুমদার



Techniques of the body are nothing, if not traditional. “There is no technique and no transmission in the absence of tradition. This above all is what distinguishes man from the animals: the transmission of his techniques and very probably their oral transmission”

(Mauss, 75⁶). 19 year old student Kaushik Pal, a dancer and an altar boy, has scary stories of how the traditional techniques of the body were taught to him. As a child, he liked to urinate sitting down, a supposedly ‘unmasculine’ activity, and every time he did so, his mother beat him up, till he was ‘cured’ of this unnatural urge, till he learnt to pee standing up. Recently during the Saraha frenzy that gripped Indian facebook users, a young gay researcher from Jadavpur University was asked, in an anonymous message, whether he sits down to pee, or stand up. The association of masculinity with the way one pees (and the translation of that association in the construction of public toilets assigned for men) seems to be absolute, one that Kaushik has learnt to embody, when necessary. While he identifies as an effeminate gay cis-man, he also knows that the bodily demeanours he deems natural to him are not safe, and are likely to bring violent repercussions in a deeply heteronormative society. So, in order to prevent the recurrence of a traumatic event such as being locked up by ‘senior boys’, (something that happened to him at Jogeshchandra College), he now adopts a ‘normal’ stance when navigating public utilities. He says, ‘I behave like a ‘man’, and enter the toilets’. Cleaners have peeped and laughed at him, other men using urinals have tended to peep and crack jokes, but since he started acting ‘normal’ in such spaces, problems navigating them have reduced. Jogeshchandra College being close to South City Mall, he used to go there many a times, to use the bathrooms. In the mall, the bathrooms are cleaner, less crowded and as long as he passes as a ‘manly man’, safe.

The question then, is of passing. Can a transman pass as a man, can an effeminate cis-man pass as one and what learnt body techniques does passing entail? Do different spaces need different kinds of passing and how to imagine a safe city, even when one cannot pass?

Who cleans after you? Where did they come from?

Who cleans your toilet, I asked Kaushik. “Once a week a cleaner comes to our house, I don’t know his name. He has been coming for many years, is from Bihar. He speaks in Hindi”. Chavasa Thurza, sweeper with Kolkata Municipal Corporation speaks: “This city has been built on the labour of people from Bihar and Jharkhand.” People from Gaya, Navoda, hazaribagh, Giridi, Koderma, Dhanbad, Chhatra, he adds. From Baishali district, add the men working as caretakers and cleaners at the KMC-Sulabh Pay and Use Toilet (PUT) in front of Narendrapur Ramakrishna Mission.

“Conservancy and Engineering workers, those yielding the broom and those entering the drain, are all Biharis—their fathers and often grandfathers, did the same jobs before them, as they are doing now” (Thurza). Often after working for twenty years or so, the fathers would be offered the choice of voluntary retirement, and their sons would step in their places. Permanent employees of the KMC, cleaning our city, on a typical day between 5.30 am to 1230 p.m., starting from signing at the Block office register (Thurza works at ward no. 50, block no 1), sweeping the roads, collecting his cart from Loreto school (that pays him INR 1000 in exchange of disposing of their garbage) and using a smaller broom and ‘belcha’ to scoop the garbage up, loading it in the cart and depositing it in the vat. The process is repeated again at 10.00, because by then householders would have thrown plastic packets filled with garbage on the roads, and crows and dogs would have started to tear those open. Sudipta Kaviraj locates the inside and outside in nineteenth century Bengali

⁶ Mauss, Marcel. “Techniques of the Body.” *Economy and Society* 2, 1973, pp 70-88.

bhadralok homes as also constitutive of what needs to be kept ritually clean and what not⁷. However, the garbage cleaned ‘obsessively’ from the inside, the house, could be then piled in a mound right outside the house. This was, and continues to be possible because

When the garbage is dumped, it is not placed at a point where it cannot causally affect the realm of the household and its hygienic well-being. It is thrown over a conceptual boundary. The street was the outside, the space for which one did not have responsibility, or which was not *one’s own*, and it therefore lacked any association with obligation, because it did not symbolise any significant principle, did not express any values (98).

A practice that continues till date, and with equal sense of impunity, as both a quick walk down most Kolkata lanes and bylane as well as Thurza’s description of his workday attest. What Kaviraj doesn’t mention in his formulation, but is evident in this ‘conceptual boundary’, is that the responsibility for keeping the ‘outside’ clean lies with others, also outside the boundaries of caste society. A curious architectural innovation, typical to Bengal, makes the moment when the outside has to enter the inside, manifest. The *‘jamadar-er sNiri’*, the circular staircase attached to the outer wall of mansions that opened into indoor bathrooms and toilets for the sweeper to access, testifies to moment of anxiety when ritually impure tasks such as cleaning the toilet, in gentrified households, necessitated the presence of the ritually impure outsider.

The inside/ outside binary gets complicated, once we take into account the seventy odd thousand pavement dwellers in Calcutta (no reference), whose most intimate private acts are also carried out under the flimsiest screens from the public gaze. A list posted on the Safai Karmachari Andolan website, in 2011, (as a result of surveys conducted in 2010, and submitted to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment) puts the total number of dry latrines in West Bengal at 56, and the number of manual scavengers employed in cleaning them at 29 (the result of 12 surveys)⁸. However, people employed as sweepers in cities like Kolkata don’t count as manual scavengers, even though they regularly have to remove shit—both human and animal, in the course of cleaning out roads and pavements. Who shits there, and where do the sweepers themselves go? These questions will be visited in the two next sections, alongside the questions of the many publics and the few privates of the city.

Those that keep our cities clean, however, do not have a space to clean up after work, or the implements necessary to keep their work hygienic. Masks, shoes and gloves were provided once in the recent past, when the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan was launched by the current central government. That was the time when they were also provided with uniforms, but made of coarse materials, the uniform turned out to be exceptionally itchy, and as a result nobody wears them. The block office has toilets, but not a space where one can bathe. So, while many of Thurza’s colleagues make the long trek back from their shifts at Vardaan Market or the planetarium, to clean up at their homes in Convent Road, Thurza goes to a small hotel near Sealdah station where they pay him INR 500 a month to throw their garbage away. In addition he is given a room where he can bathe and wash his clothes, and hang them to dry to wear the next day. A sweeper’s work then, marks a specific spatial

⁷ Kaviraj, Sudipta. “Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and practices About Space in Calcutta.” *Public Culture*. 10: 1, 1997. 83-113.

⁸ <http://www.safaikarmachariandolan.org/survey.html>

geography for him, within the city that he cleans. While Thurza has a bicycle and rides it to work, several of his neighbours like Suresh Ravidas (who works in ward no, 68) or Sudama Ravidas (ward no. 57) walk to and from work, forty minutes to an hour each way. Suresh keeps his cart in a private English medium school near Vardhaan market, unlike Thurza he doesn't get paid anything but has to dispose of their trash in exchange of keeping his cart there. He also alleges that in the ward office, the officers use the bathrooms that are kept under lock and key, while the rest no-one uses. He cleans up at the school and comes back home, on foot. Sudama walks back home after his shift and bathes in his brother-in-law's house, since he can access running water there. The city then, for them, is marked by the routes they travel and those that they clean—the spaces where they can clean themselves up, and the spaces where they cannot. Their being here, at all, is also the result of a *longue duree* migration, over centuries, and always, to perform the same task.

Bagchi and Mitra⁹ demonstrate, citing several sources:

The traditional caste group which used to serve as scavengers in British India were the Bhangis who were deployed by the municipal authorities to clear out the garbage in the cities, including human excreta and dead bodies (Sharma 1995). The practice still continues in post-colonial India where services like sweeping the streets and cleaning sewers and septic tanks are performed by people of specific caste groups like the Bhangis, Mehtars, Balmikis (or Valmikis) and Helas (Human Rights Watch 2014). The Government of West Bengal puts Bhangis, Mehtars, Methars and Haris under the same serial number in its list of Scheduled Castes in the state, indicating that these groups fall under the same category in the caste hierarchy and probably perform similar functions in a caste-based society. A study on Hindi-speaking Dalits¹² in West Bengal recounts how people belonging to these castes were brought from Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, Bihar and other states to Calcutta during the British raj for conservancy services in the city (Rawat N.D.). (155- 156).

Tanika Sarkar¹⁰, in her recent unpublished study of the Methar strike in KMC writes, about the conservancy workers employed in Kolkata:

The three villages which constituted early Calcutta would employ local Dom and Hadi Methars. As the city grew with a building spree in the 18th century, the demand for nightsoil removal also grew. Labourers from Chhotonagpur Adivasis then joined the work, sometime in the early 19th century. Censuses, as well as contemporary Bengali dictionaries, call Methars forest dwelling “jungle”, “ashabhya” and “Anarya” people: uncivilized, beyond and below the Hindu caste order.

Most probably, Adivasis were first imported to clear forests and drain marshes – they were widely renowned for such skills – that abounded in early Calcutta. Once tree felling and marsh draining slackened, they would turn to other urban occupations. North Indian migrant labourers poured into Calcutta from the late 19th century, and many joined the ranks of Dhangars/ Doms/ Methars, as they

⁹ Bagchi, Debarati and Iman Mitra. “Life, Labour, Recycling: A Study of Waste Management Practices in Contemporary Kolkata.” *Accumulation in Post-Colonial Capitalism*, edited by Iman Kumar Mitra, Ranabir Samaddar and Samita Sen, Springer, 2017, pp. 149-164.

¹⁰ Sarkar Tanika. “Remaking Caste and Work: Calcutta Municipal Methars and their Strike in 1928.” 2017.

turned to manual scavenging. But till at least the 1860s, tribals predominated “...Dhangars and other hill tribes who do such important though dirty work in the drainage of Calcutta..” 10

Some scavengers were a few notches above them. One Bala Chamar tried to block the strike of 1928. Chamars, an untouchable tanner caste, were ritually somewhat superior to Doms or Hadis. Riskey, in 1891, also described Methars as “a sub caste of Hadis who remove nightsoil” as well as as “a section of Maghaya Kumhars...of the Dharkar subcaste of Doms..” The latter were untouchable potters who were ranked above nightsoil cleaners. A very small segment was Muslim. The 1911 Census also shows the sudden appearance of sixteen Christian scavengers. In the 1911 Census, women Methranis numbered 1,889 as against 7,210 men.

Who works as a sweeper? What is their caste?

Caste is a bone of contention in the aftermath of these histories. Ruprani Hela, sweeper at Bethune College comes from a long family of people who worked in the same profession. Her maternal grandparents had come to Kolkata, where both used to work as replacements of other sweepers, the grandfather at City College and the grandmother at Bank of India, Hatibagan Branch, and was later turned into permanent employees. Same was the case with her mother, while Ruprani got her job through the employment exchange. As in the case with the sweepers mentioned earlier, employment was so far conducted through kinship networks, that also served the purpose of keeping such unclean jobs within the ambit of certain caste groups. Bank employees attest, for several decades at least, sweeping jobs were ‘reserved’ for people of the so called untouchable castes, and in the few instances that other castes were employed, the incumbent usually let a member of a dalit caste do his job, for a lesser payment, while they were occupied with other, more ‘respectable’ jobs. Recently, the West Bengal government conducted a survey of the caste and religion profile of its employees. A staunch Ambedkarite, Thurza asked the block officer, ‘Why should I write down my caste now, when I did not have to do so at the time of joining this job?’

This, points at the easy conflation of certain castes with certain ‘menial’, ‘unclean’ jobs that went into the construction of the important services that form this city. Much of it, in contemporary Bengal, attests itself at times through tragedy, and at others, through attempts at farce. Recently, one young man killed himself for being offered a sweeper’s job even after having a bachelor’s degree as well as a degree in education¹¹. A recurrent joke doing the rounds of social media (supposed to comment on the lack of jobs in West Bengal) draws upon the number of applicants with doctoral degrees who applied for a ‘Dom’s job at a government hospital¹². The common sense of the joke draws upon the work of the carcass attendant as one that is unclean, undesirable and lacking in any expertise, fit for specific castes that have fulfilled them so far—the Doms.

It is evident then, not merely people from certain regions, but certain, formerly designated as untouchable castes are responsible for the sanitary city that we live in. However, who cares for their sanitation?

¹¹ <http://www.millenniumpost.in/kolkata/educated-youth-offered-cleaning-staff-job-at-private-firm-kills-self-256875>

¹² <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/mphils-phd-students-apply-for-hospital-job-to-handle-corpSES/articleshow/59536329.cms>

The open city, the walled city, the municipal quarters: who goes to which toilet?

To map the city in terms of people's access to sanitation, let us move from slums with pukka housings, to the open city, where people live in temporary shacks, and finally to those that live on pavements, under the open sky. As the urban geography changes, so does the imagined geography of the landscape, the one we have been trying to map, keeping sanitation in focus. Chavasa Thurza and many of his colleagues live at 6, Convent Road, Haripara (notice the caste name associated with the place they have settled in), Kolkata 14. Many years ago, this used to be abandoned land, housing a few shanties, till the KMC built a block of one room flats with shared bathrooms and toilets, to house some of its employees who had to move from their former quarters, since the land was sold to a private player. In the wake of this four storey building, came many others, who cleaned up the land, built their one room houses with brick and asbestos and, to start with, three Indian style latrine. Two of them were built right on top of the huge drainage canal that runs through the tenements, with the faecal object being deposited right into the canal. Full of noxious smells at the best of times, these are however preferred to the ones built by KMC right next, since faulty construction makes them clog up. Of course, both types of latrines do not have running water, and people carry their own, when they use it. [Images 4, 5].



(This is the one, opening on the canal, that is used, while the one below, is not)



The source of water in the tenements is of two kinds, nine drinking water taps for approximately 2000 people who live there, and couple of open water tanks where men bathe and women fetch water from. Many, like Thurza himself and Sudama Ravidas's brother in law, have built spaces for women to bathe in, inside their houses, some have even managed to rig a contraption that provides running water.

The tenements house both permanent and contractual employees of the KMC, as well as people who do not work for the KMC. The division between them is marked, not least in the choice of schools where their children are sent. The children of people who do not work with the KMC go to the local government school, Saraswati Sadan, while those of the KMC employees go to the nearby English medium private school, Joseph Day. However, in terms of sanitation, the difference between residents of the same slum can be seen in what Desai et al call 'improvisation':

This notion of improvisation is inspired by Abdoumalig Simone's writings on urban practices in African cities. For Simone, improvisation involves practices through which bodies, infrastructures, objects, and spaces are brought into various combinations and configurations that become a platform for providing for life in the uncertain city and generating stability. These practices facilitate "the intersection of socialities so that an expanded space of economic and cultural operation becomes available for residents of limited means" (Simone 2004:407). Such improvisations are pursued around sanitation as well, for instance, when groups of residents without access to toilets come together to contribute time, money, material and labour to the construction of makeshift hanging latrines, or when groups of residents introduce lock-and-key arrangements on a public toilet block to restrict access and thus control the cleanliness of the toilets they use. (106)

Here, at Haripara, apart from three all latrines are constructed by the KMC. Apart from the building that houses some of its employees, there are some barrack-like rooms as well, who rent is paid to the KMC, therefore, they are also identified as quarters. All the latrines next to these quarters have been locked by the residents of the quarters, for exclusive use. Among the others, some more have been locked by permanent KMC employees, while contractual employees and their families use the unlocked latrines with the rest of the people—conditions of work and material and financial differences imprint themselves onto sanitary spaces and practices. Each morning, men and women queue at the latrines, so much so that many of the sweepers (who specifically have early morning shifts) leave for work without ever visiting the latrine. Embodied realities are shaped and reshaped with

access to sanitation, an access that is relative to social position, even at the margins and fissures of the city.



[Images 6 and 7].

Who cleans them? Well, the users take care of its cleanliness. Even though KMC has built them, no one ever comes to clean them, although there are people employed to sweep the roads.

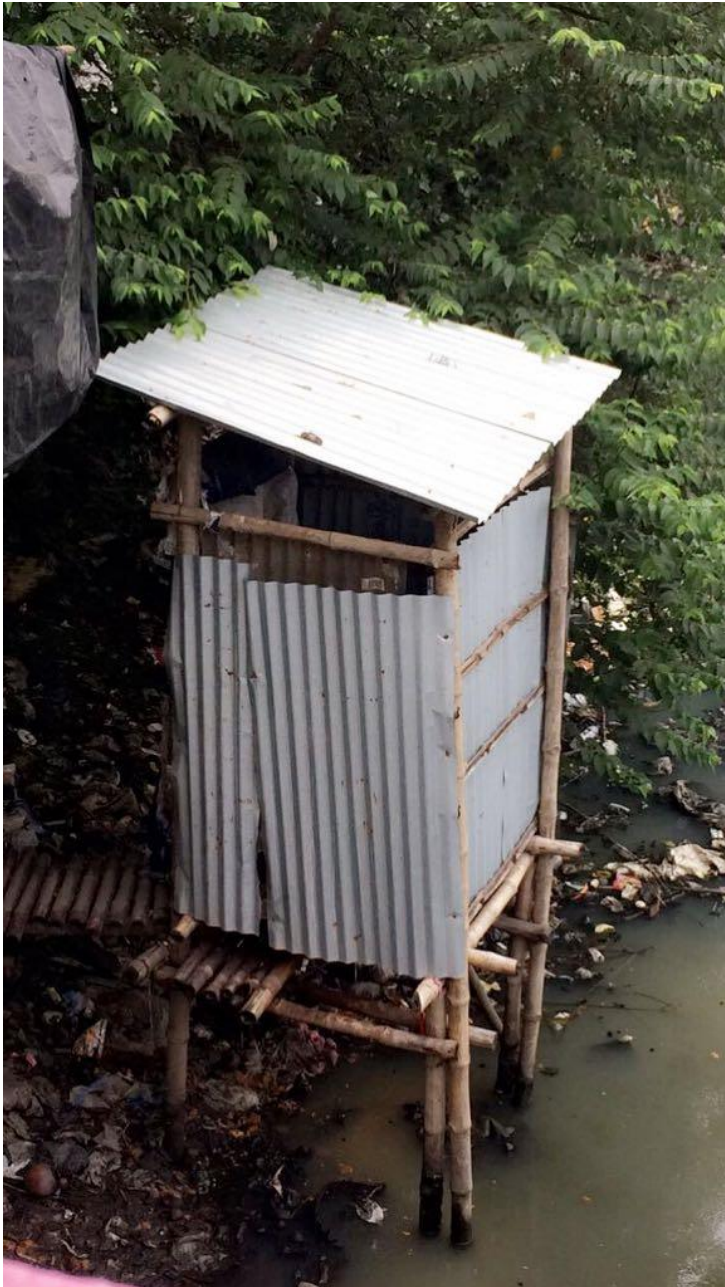


Image 8

From Entally let us move northwards, to Rajabajar and behind the railway tracks. Mayana Bibi, Aji Vaya and Tomena bibi live in make shift shanties, working respectively as a rag picker, a prawn seller at Sealdah market and as one advocating family planning as part of an NGO. Ordinarily, they use the makeshift latrine constructed by bamboo poles with tarpaulin sheets covering the sides, that opens directly into the canal behind their settlement. Couple of years ago, an NGO replaced some of the tarpaulin sheets with tin ones, making the constructions slightly less dangerous [images 8 and 9]. Women of the settlement use these mostly, as do the children: the fear that one of the children will slip and fall is constant, and at night, the place is almost impossible to access. Aji Vaya leaves for work at 6 a.m, and returns at around 4.30 p.m, when at work she uses the bathroom built

by the bazaar committee, but being for the general public, it is seldom cleaned.



Image 9

Samita Sarkar lives below the Ballygunge Station, she picks newspapers and other waste material under Gariahat flyover. Pinki Halder lives under the Gariahat flyover, and cleans utensils at a guest house in Dover Lane. Putul Mandal also lives in Ballygunge station area, and owns a tea shop. Sumitra (she did not give her last name) lives at the junction of Vivekananda Road and Bidhan Sarani, and takes care of her husband and school going son. Meena Sarkar lives at Maniktala, next to the Jorabagan Power station and is a domestic worker. Two things bring these women together, despite their widely different occupations, ages and locations: one, they live in mostly under the open sky (or a flyover), in extremely transient households, whose demarcations change with seasons and footfall; and second: they use KMC built public utilities for their biological needs. Although maintained by KMC, the tariff varies across the city. In the south bathing costs INR 6 or INR 7 while in the North it is INR 5, defecation is at INR 3 or 4 across the city, while at some places urination for women is free, at others it is charged at INR 2. But these utilise are open from 5 in the morning to 10 or 11 at night, what happens during the time they are shut? Sumitra claims that during those hours she doesn't need to go, although the others agree that the roadside and the footpath is where they go, when the public utilities are shut and/ or are crowded.

How does one read the lives and intimate, metabolic actions of these women? Their entire lives are lived in public gaze, in spaces that were made for other purposes: for walking or

for vehicular traffic, their dwellings are encroachments upon the plan of the city, as it ‘develops’. Their homes can be walked through, their food open to the gaze of every passerby, the boundaries of their homes shifting, the division of public and private—so crucial to the development of the way modern sanitary practices have been brought under governmental control, literally non-existent. The metabolic city charges them that little bit extra: the tax of living on the edge, in a conceptual lacunae.

SULABH and KMC:

The KMC website lists 383 public pay and use toilets maintained by it in the KMC area¹³-- some are built by the KMC, others are built by private players such as Toilets and Toilets Private Limited, in collaboration with corporate organisations, as part of their corporate social responsibility programmes, and handed over to KMC. All the PUTs are maintained by private contractors, often Sulabh International, the managerial and cleaning staff paid by the private players. Employment is without fail contractual, there are no paid leaves and the staff is almost always of specific caste origins. Sulabh’s stated aim¹⁴ is to end the scourge of manual scavenging, by making clean sanitation available to everyone at a nominal price, but studies suggest that Dalits continue to occupy the ‘low caste’ occupations within the organisation (Sharma 201). The PUTs are often constructed badly, especially for women the stalls are cramped, often littered with used sanitary pads (since the stalls do not have dustbins and women are often uncomfortable carrying soiled pads out) and extremely difficult to navigate for the aged or the differently abled.

The PUTs also have distinct user bases. The stretch of Bidhan Sarani between Vivekananda Road and Beadon Street has three different PUTs. This stretch is also the home to about 50 pavements dwellers, men and women alike. But irrespective of their proximity to the PUT on Ramdulal Sarkar Street, women on that stretch either visit the PUT on the Vivekananda Road, or the one on Beadon Street.

Google map contains the locations of only a handful of PUTs, while a now defunct project titled “Loo Watch” had sought to provide a user’s review of as well as a map of PUTs in Kolkata. The PUTs cater to a wide cross section of people, but their strict gender segregation, unwieldy structure and the sheer inadequacy of numbers in the face of the huge populations who depend on such utilities in the course of their movement in the city, makes governmental organising of human sanitation woefully inadequate.

What next?

The aim in this paper was to propose a model of viewing the city as constituting of sanitary practices, infrastructures and imaginations. To end with the question Paromita Vohra asked in 2006, what would a city look like if it took women’s sanitation needs seriously? The attempt in this ongoing project is to open up the question further, what do sanitary practices and sanitary bodies make of the city? Where do menstruating men and women fit in—how do we ensure that the differently abled do not have to undergo yet another set of repressive bodily practices to navigate the city, where do the people the city has pushed to

¹³ https://www.kmcgov.in/KMCPortal/downloads/pay_toilets_05_11_2015.pdf

¹⁴ Sharma, Mukul. “Brahminical Activism as Eco-casteism: Reading the Life Narratives of Bindeshwar Pathak, Sulabh International and “Liberated Dalits.” *Biography*, vol. 40, no.1, 2017, pp. 199-221.

its margins go—and what are the embodied techniques that enable its citizens navigate the unsanitary city that fails its sanitary needs?

DRAFT