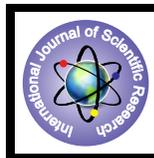


A Feminist Analysis of Gender in Urban Space



Social Science

KEYWORDS : Space, Gender, Urban public space, Patriarchy, Gendered public space.

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is a study of the relationships between space and gender. It argues that urban public space is a byproduct of social relations and manifestations. The paper attempts to put forth an argument that men and women access public space differently, which, henceforth is an outcome of the ever-pervasive social evil- 'patriarchy'.

Introduction

Public space (both rural and urban) is a social-cultural construct whereby access to public space is intertwined with caste/class/religion/gender. These forces are the determinants of a person's accessibility to public space. The marginalized sections of the society are more vulnerable in the public space and their risk of being harmed is more compared to the higher in the hierarchy. (Pain,1997). Further, marginalization in terms of gender doubly disadvantages women in their access to urban public space. This view is in conjunction with the arguments addressed by various feminist scholars such as Phadke (2007), Ranade (2007), Koskela (1999) and others. They state that space is a byproduct of social relations and practices. It is manufactured by a multiplicity of social relations across various diversities such as class, caste, religion and gender. The way the society adheres across these (caste/class/religion/gender) diversities is very well replicated in the urban public space.

Patriarchal Gendered Space

The social evil- 'patriarchy' which in a way could be said as the root of all evils in the society has dominated our social and personal life for centuries. Therefore, needless to mention that it has grossly dominated the public spaces, which one could rightly state as a space for social growth of individuals. The public space, therefore, could be correctly quoted as "patriarchal gendered space" which is continuously recreated by the individuals themselves (Abraham, 2010). Thereby public space in itself is androcentric, a proof of which could be seen in the forms of rapes, sexual harassment, molestation and other such abuses which deter the movement of the marginalized gender. The consequences of these androcentric gendered spaces are that it creates various mental and physical, social obstructions which, henceforth amount to a restricted mobility of women. It is conceived as a space which is not conducive for a woman or rather as a realm unfit for women's access. To this Perception and Experience of Gendered Violations in Public Places of Delhi, Baseline, Report, November, 2009 has explicitly stated the freedom of movement, speech and expression which the Constitution of India guarantees to all its citizens is not effectively applied to half of the population. "Women are unable to achieve their full capabilities due to social and cultural constraints... thus impeding their effective economic and political participation. This stems out of the patriarchal understanding that public spaces belong to men." (Perception and Experience of Gendered Violations in Public Places of Delhi, Baseline, Report: November 2009, p. 5).

Ranade (2007) justifiably argued that the public space is a patriarchal gender regime. A female body is a marker of difference in the public space. A woman's location in space/time becomes a crucial site of signification for the social order. Again in support of the above argument, Phadke (2007) argues that the public space is constructed as an arena dangerous for women. It is contaminated by its disorder and women should not venture out in the public spaces and must be protected in the private spaces of the home. Therefore, within such a male dominated socio-spatial order, public spaces in particular, are even further coded as male.

Therefore, one can argue that planning of urban public space has continued to be male-centric. Urban planning does not take into consideration the pivotal issues affecting women's access to public space so as to facilitate their access to these spaces. However, mere planning of a city would not really facilitate the movement of women, at the same time it is very crucial to uproot the ever pervading social evil that is 'patriarchy'. One understands this has been a long drawn project of the feminist school of thought. Enduring socio, political struggles have been in place to eradicate the evil, but since this is not seen as an evil or injustice by a major percentage of the population, it has therefore been a difficult task to uproot the evil.

Strategic movement of women:

Women constantly strategize their movement in the public space, in order to remain safe and comfortable – this is the mechanism women employ while they access public space. (Wesely and Gaarder, 2004, p. 649). They do this by weighing where they choose to go, what they wear, by seeking company and so on. Mumbai ranks as the safest city in India for women, according to the results of the Hindustan Times-IPOS Indica Research study, 2010. A three-year Pukar gender and space study focused on women's access to public space in Mumbai indicated that there are more women in public spaces in Mumbai and that they are relatively safer compared to the other states of the country. "However, their access to public space is still conditional and they don't feel the same claim to public space as men do," said Sameera Khan, one of the three research associates at Pukar, who collaborated on the aforesaid three-year project. However, the perception of them 'feeling safer' than women elsewhere did not imply that they have equal and unrestrained access to public space like men. Therefore, public-private dichotomy may be regarded as an a priori categorization of spaces wherein the diversification of spaces manifest; and consequently urban planning does not take into consideration the necessity of gendered planning of public spaces. Due to this lack of gendered planning of public spaces, women are placed in somewhat an ambiguous situation: where on the one hand 'the city' is coded as a space dangerous for women and on the other hand the insistence on women being career oriented, self-dependent, which imbibes the fact that women should come out of their private and supposedly protected spaces and play important roles as professionals.

Can Women Afford to take Risk

The question that follows is 'Can women afford to take risks in a male dominated public space?' Given the fact that women are day in and day out confronted with different types of risks especially the risk of being sexually assaulted is of a great concern. Therefore, it is this fear that restricts a woman's accessibility to public space. The inability of public space to guarantee the right to take risk increases the possibility of violence, thereby making women more vulnerable in the public space.

The idea of risk associated with women's access to public space has been extensively dealt with by Phadke (2007). She states that

before seeking safety one needs to seek the right to take risk, because according to her “safety in relation to women’s chastity or sexual virtue can only provide conditional protection and not the right to public space. ...What we might seek then is an equality of risk, i.e. not that woman should never be attacked, but that when they are, they should receive a citizen’s right to redress and their right to be in that space is unquestioned. Toilets for women, for instance, should stay open all night...Keeping toilets open all night for women would send the significant message that women have every right in public space.” (Phadke, 2007, p. 1516). Therefore the regime of urban planning of public space should address “legitimate right to take risks” if it is to guarantee a just and equal public space for both men and women.

Masquerading Public Spaces

The development of urban public spaces is marked by the construction of shopping malls, bars, restaurants and others. But an analysis of the concept of ‘development’ of urban public spaces does not necessarily conform to the construction of malls, or multiplexes, but rather to a space which confirms to ‘a just and equitable public space’ where people along gender, class, caste, or religion has an equitable access to the public space and there is no discrimination along these lines. In this analysis one is trying to examine the inequitable access of public space in terms of gender and would seek to state that how certain spaces masquerades as public spaces. Therefore, in the subsequent discussion, we see how these spaces manifest a critical assertion to gendered public space and raises the question: Are these public or private spaces? One would state here that these spaces are a perfect example where public and private spaces cross cuts each other. . In the following context, one would discuss access to shopping malls and how gender cross cuts its legitimate access.

Shopping Malls: Malls are a complexly organized public space where there is continued movement of people across gender. But one category that is overtly existent is the class identity and not much of a gender identity. We would find the predominant influx of women in these spaces. Let’s put up another interrogation here- How are malls organized? This one would state that a mall is a space that is continuously guarded by security at every entrance and exit and CCTV cameras fixed all around. The reason primarily could be to guard property, or rather to ensure that nothing is being stolen from the mall. Very interestingly, this aspect plays in favor of women because women tend to feel safe in these spaces and thereby accessibility of these spaces is on increase for them. Can we mark these spaces as ‘pure public space’? One would state in a negative- because, like private spaces which, is essentially assumed to be secure and safe spaces, malls are also secured and safe spaces with regard to the aspect of surveillance all around. It does not have the characteristic of public space such as the factor of risks. “The new spaces of consumption (shopping malls and coffee shops)...It is important at this point to underscore that these are not “public” spaces, but privatized spaces that masquerade as public spaces, where entry is ostensibly open in reality regulated through various subtle and over acts (intentional and unintentional) intimidation and exclusion”. (Phadke, 2007, p. 1514). Therefore the underscore development of these public spaces, where the movement of women is not restricted covers within its womb these deceptive dimensions.

Conclusion

Urban space is a concrete manifestation of ideas of how society was, is and how it should be, thereby bringing into focus the idea of the gendered urban space. The study attempted to state that the urban space is a forum where it greatly reinforces the values and norms upheld in the society. The societal norms which the urban space manifests are based on unequal power relations across gender, class, caste, and religion, thereby making urban space dangerous for women. In conformity with this view one can essentially state that the presence of women is a marker of difference in the public space (Ranade: 2007: 1523). The public domain is established to be a male dominated realm and thereby a woman’s position in this space is always under question.

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