



UNDERSTANDING KHATRI WOMEN'S LIVES IN A MUMBAI NEIGHBOURHOOD

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Pydhonie in the south of Mumbai is one of the oldest residential as well as commercial areas of the city. It is a small, densely populated region with different businesses and activities thriving in and around the area. In this area there is a neighbourhood dominated by the Khatri community. The Khatri women residing in this area were interviewed to understand the changing nature of their lives as well as the ways in which they have negotiated the changes. This paper aims to comparatively analyse the lived experiences and perspectives of three women from three generations, through ethnographic case studies, from a feminist standpoint perspective. Covering a period of approximately sixty years to the contemporary times, the analyses will be in relation to, their education, work, marriage patterns, as well as the lived experiences within the home, in the community, and the neighbourhood.

Keywords: *Women, Gender, Cross Generational Understanding, Ethnographic Case Studies, Feminist Standpoint Perspective, Neighbourhood, Home, Work, Education, Marriage Patterns*

Introduction

Public and Private spaces are continuously under surveillance and scrutiny. This is due to the existing patriarchal structures. That reside in the different social structures and institutions including marriage, family, neighbourhood, community and, so on. This intimidates, controls and channelises women's access, participation and, experience of space.

Pydhonie area is in the Mandvi region in the south of Mumbai. It is one of the oldest residential as well as commercial areas of the city. It is a small, densely populated region with different businesses and activities thriving in and around the area. In this area there is a neighbourhood dominated by the Khatri community, since the neighbourhood came into existence. A large number of the Khatri community live in the three parallel streets – Babu Khote Street, Ali Umar Street, and Kazi Street in Pydhonie. This is one of the oldest city areas and has retained some of its older peculiarities, also adapting to changing times.

This neighbourhood has a strong identity and highly considerable neighbourhood ties and connections, and everyday interactions. The Khatri community is a close knit predominantly endogamous jamat (group) of Sunni Muslims who trace their roots to various regions of Kutch in present day Gujarat. Their traditional occupation was dyeing clothes. Many of them continue with it and have also successfully ventured into dyeing various types of clothes and allied products, many others have taken up other businesses and occupations.

The Muslims like Memons, Bohras, Khojas, Pathans, and others (including Khatri) were migrating in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the forming city in the Bombay Island then (David, 1998), (Pusalker & Dighe, 1949). Many of them came and settled in the areas including Mahim, Sewri, Dongri, Umarchadi, Null Bazaar, Pydhonie, Crawford Market and, Nagpada. These areas still continue to be a stronghold of Muslims.

Shaw (2012), mentions about the mixed land use – residential, commercial and other economic uses. This has been a distinguishing feature of Indian cities, from pre-colonial urbanism through colonialism into the post-independence years.

This paper comparatively analyses the lives of three Khatri women of three generations, from the neighbourhood.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Standpoint Theory: When it is very well understood as to how knowledge of gender is interconnected with women's experiences and the realities of gender; a standpoint can be taken. Knowledge can be produced from a feminist standpoint wherever women live in unequal gendered social relationships and can develop a feminist political consciousness. It is a way of exploring how women experience life differently from men or others, because they live in specific social relationships amidst

male domination. As there is more than one feminist theory and more than one feminist epistemological position; there are various approaches to taking a feminist standpoint. (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002).

Gender experiences vary across the cultural categories. These are also many times, in conflict in any individual's experience. Like the contradictory identity of a daughter and a sociologist. The identity politics, the fragmented identities are a rich source of feminist insight. Feminist research projects originate primarily not in any old "women's experiences", but in women's experiences in political struggles. The home (private) as well the street (public) are both sites of political struggles. Such struggles help a person understand oneself and make sense of the social world around (Harding, 1987).

My experience of conducting research was unique due to my insider-outsider status. I am from the Khatri community (insider). However, at the same time I have not lived in this neighbourhood (outsider).

Space as a Social Product: The concept of space, its production and experience are a social product created by humans which in turn also impact the social relations and vice versa. Lefebvre [1974 (1991)], proposes a trialectics of spatiality that explores the interweaving of cultural practices, representations and imaginations. Moving away from an analysis of the location of spatial phenomena, this is an account that sees space as 'made up' through a three-way dialectic between perceived, conceived and lived space.

Space has to be considered with the intellect but also with the senses with the "total body" that is not alienated. Space is a practiced place. Space exists physically but is understood and experienced by the way it is felt, perceived and determined. Place is usually associated with security, enclosure and stability, space on the other hand, with lack of stability or specificity, freedom and mobility (De Certeau 1984, Conley 2014).

Experience of Gendered Space: The public/private dichotomy (both the political and spatial dimensions) is frequently employed to construct, control, discipline, confine, exclude and suppress gender and sexual difference preserving traditional patriarchal and heterosexist power structures. It is clear that the public-private distinction is gendered. This binary opposition is employed to legitimate oppression and dependence on the basis of gender; it has also been used to regulate sexuality. The private as an ideal type has traditionally been associated and mixed with: the domestic, the embodied, the natural, the family, property, the 'shadowy interior of the household', personal life, intimacy, passion, sexuality, 'the good life', care, a haven, unwaged labour, reproduction and immanence. The public as an ideal type has traditionally been the domain of the disembodied, the abstract, the cultural, rationality, critical public discourse, citizenship, civil society, justice, the market place, waged labour, production, the police, the state, action, militarism, heroism, and transcendence (Duncan, 1996).

Space is often a reflection of culture. It can be understood literally, as a physical area, or emotionally, as a mental state. The way spaces are organized – whether geographically, architecturally, or hierarchically – significantly impacts our experience of them. Both public and private spaces are structured by inclusions and exclusions, acting as key indicators of segregation that reinforce social power dynamics. Hence, space is a complex environment, both real and imagined, shaped by socio-political courses, cultural norms, and institutional frameworks. These elements influence how we exist, belong, and inhabit a space, which in turn influences and shapes the social relationships that created it. Feminist analyses asserts that gender facilitates the production and structuring of space in many ways. The construction of gender is predisposed by spatial relations, which in turn manifest gender relations in space. The term 'gendered spaces' describes how society shapes the use of geographical and architectural zones, often limiting women's access to spaces where power and privilege are held within a specific setting (Desai 2007, Phadke 2007).

Review of Literature

Neighbourhood

Neighbours tend to be strong guardians of the norms and rules in the area and exercise significant social control. Through ways like condemnation, commenting, gossiping, and advising. They played an important role at various occasions, functions, and the ones nearest anytime support or help is required. Mainly, that is why, it is desirable and advisable to maintain cordial relations with the neighbours. Social behaviour is controlled by the fear of 'comments' or rumours in the neighbourhood. Gossip functions as a social control measure in a neighbourhood that is closely knit with frequent interaction (Abraham, 2018).

The standard idea of coming across as respectable in a neighbourhood, is important for a woman or a girl, through her attire, mobility, and behaviour. Many times, this is because marriage proposals often come from the local social relationships.

Neighbourhoods are created through a variety of practises: reciprocity, friendship, worship, control or violence, following or imitating or going along with the neighbourhood choices. Neighbourhoods are created differently at different times and around varied everyday and other activities. The central characteristic of neighbourhoods is their spatial proximity, that enables sensory engagement with others and includes, face-to-face interaction as well as the sight and smell of food, sounds of work, equipment, arguments, or violence. It is this everyday sensorial communication that makes the neighbourhood a powerful factor in the residents' lives. Neighbourhood culture does not originate merely within a constricted locality. Rather, it emerges from a convergence of multiple influences and transformative processes – local, national, and global, that intersect, are negotiated, and are articulated through rules and everyday practices. The restrictive effects associated with a neighbourhood are interpreted and negotiated in distinct ways by different individuals (Abraham, 2018).

Urban neighbourhoods have an active community life, important and strong primary group relations. Ethnographic research shows that the densely populated inner-city neighbourhoods are not chaotic. Cities are meaningful physical environments.

Distinct meanings and specific emotions are attributed with places, by people. One can see not only one's residence as 'home' but also the neighbourhood where that abode is. Because to both these places, one associates feelings of comfort, security, and familiarity. "A neighbourhood can be defined as any sociospatial environment where primary relations among residents dominate. Community depends less on territory and is more a function of a network of friends and relatives dispersed in space" (Gottdiener et. al., 2015).

Gottdiener, et. al. (2015) have explained types of neighbourhoods through the work of Rachele and Donald Warren (1977). One of it is; "the parochial neighbourhood has a strong subcultural orientation that dominates everyday life. This is a stable community with strong identity and considerable neighbouring and interaction. However, the urban village tends to have weak ties to the surrounding area and to the city as a whole and may not possess political influence".

Community

It is difficult to observe and to describe community. The idea of community can be applied in conservative and progressive ways, although it confuses the distinction between them. Community language can express shared identities, collective dreams, or distinctions between groups. When we talk about community, space and social life are often intertwined; it is as if certain places create specific social ties, or the other way around. In this context, the idea of community can embrace the city's diversity while also highlighting pockets of relative homogeneity based on class, ethnicity, or culture (Tonkiss, 2005: 24-25).

Community is a practice of urban settings, it is done through performance, it produces shared histories, the symbolic making of social identities through practices. It is a feeling at home and feeling included (Blokland, 2017).

Generation One – 1950s to 1970s

One respondent who was 68 years old at the time of the interview describes her lived experiences from childhood to teenage to marriage as follows;

"In my childhood (1950 to early 1960s), I used to play in the street, every day, till I was fourteen years old. I would just convince my aunt each time and go to the street to play with my friends, to eat something or just to roam. There was one incident that I vividly remember, it was the day when I last went down to the street to play. During those days we were told that when the streetlights (in those days there were lanterns) are lit up, we should go back home. One day, I was playing with my friends at their home, who were also residents of Ali Umar Street, like me. We were so busy playing at that time that I did not realise that it was already dark. Therefore, I did not even go home. One of my brothers called out from the street asking, where was I. He told me to come out fast because our father was calling me. My father was a strict and hot-tempered man. I was so scared. I came down instantaneously. I thought to myself that it is too late and my father will scold me. He said come up home; father is waiting for you. I went upstairs then my mother pulled both my cheeks in such a way that they became red. From that day, I sat at home and stopped going out frequently, down to play or roam or without any purpose. After that, whenever I had to go out, I would have to wear a burkha. It was then a compulsion. Before that, I would roam across the street and neighbourhood freely. However, the region or area of roaming would always be limited. After I had to stop venturing out, my brothers would do my outside work. They would get whatever I would tell them to. Then after that as soon as I turned fifteen, I was engaged."

"My father was very strict. I was engaged and, sometimes I used to stand in the window. Someone went and told my father that your son to be son in law roams around near your building and this daughter of yours stands in the window. Then my father came home and told me that, "I will bury you right where you are standing, dare you peep into the window hereafter". After that, I stopped going to the window. Though, I was already engaged and soon to be married. My parents and family elders fixed my marriage proposal. I did not know who he was nor did I see him. I was fifteen years old when I was engaged. The entire process of a marriage proposal being sent for me; my family members thinking, discussing, inquiring, and deciding to agree or not, then giving the final answer of a yes; took a period of six months. In today's times, all this happens within few days, in many cases. The person who was sent to talk about the proposal from the boy's side used to go to my paternal grandmother to her house every week to talk about it. This happened for six months. He used to go to her to find out her answer. My engagement continued for three years. Then I was married at the age of eighteen."

Generation Two – 1970s to 1990s

A 37 year old respondent talks about her experiences of marriage as follows;

"My parents fixed my marriage proposal. I had just seen his photograph sent by his family. After our proposal was fixed, we met after that. However, we did not meet until marriage. My father was strict and conservative. We were used to living in that kind of an environment so that thought of meeting, going somewhere, or anything like that did not cross my mind at that time. When we friends would meet, they would ask if I went somewhere or met my fiancé, I would just say that I did not. For me, it would just be a fact that I did not meet, that is it. I was satisfied with how things were going on in my life. [She had no other option other than being satisfied with her life.] I just explain this and other things to my daughter. I do not force or restrict her for doing anything. I have not given her a childhood and adolescence like the one I had. She has many liberties unlike me. I was married at the age of twenty and by the time I was twenty-one, I became a mother.

All my female cousins (paternal) were married off at very young ages, teenage itself - seventeen, eighteen, nineteen. One of them got married at the age of seventeen and had two children before she turned twenty. These marriages happened only few years

ago from now. My marriage many years ago, at the age of twenty, was still later, if I see it from my maiden family's perspective. My maiden family is very conservative and orthodox."

Generation Three – Since 1990s

One 22 year old respondent talks about her experiences as follows;

"I did not decide who my life partner would be. My mother met my (now) fiancé [he is her cousin, mother's sister's son] and liked him as a person with nothing else in mind or looking for a suitable groom for me. My cousin was getting engaged to his (my fiancé's) brother. She thought she could tell his mother that I and her brother in law could get engaged. I had never seen or met or spoken to him. He was like a complete stranger. I saw the photograph of my fiancé a day after our alliance was fixed. Just because my mother told me that he is really nice and that she likes their family. So, I was fine with it. I was sure that if she is suggesting something she is very sure of what she is doing.

While we were getting engaged, my fiancé was studying to become a chartered accountant. They (in laws) had decided that our marriage would be solemnised only after five years from now. Even I was just eighteen and he was twenty two then. It is important to first settle (with a career) and then get into a relationship. It turned out to be very good for us! We both liked each other and have a good understanding. It is a long distance relationship and that can be very annoying sometimes. He lives in Bengaluru. I will have to go there after marriage."

Similarities and Differences over the Years

Playing in the Streets: In generation one, girls were allowed to play in the streets even along with boys. However, only within a limited area and time and only till they attained puberty. In generation two also many of the girls played in the streets. However, comparatively lesser than the previous generation. Because they were more engrossed with school life as it had become difficult than the previous generation. And from generation three only a handful may have played because of complex school lives and increasing congestion and change of shops in the streets. From mainly dyeing workshops to wholesale and retail shops majorly selling beads and accessories.

Marriage: It can be seen that all three of them had their marriages fixed by their parents and none of them had seen or met their to be grooms before marriage with the intention of fixing up a marital alliance though they may have seen each on some occasion earlier. In generation one, this was the norm, parents fixing up the alliance without asking the bride or she meeting or seeing the groom. Then in second generation also, parents fixed the alliances but the girls were asked though it was assumed that they would agree and the girls too would not question the parents' decisions and choices. They trusted them or maybe were sacred to or not used to voicing their opinions in front of 'well-wishing' parents. Many of them would be shown photographs too. In generation three, things became more open and flexible, love marriages, exogamous marriages also were seen and accepted. If parents found a proposal suitable, they would first ask the girls and if they would agree, they would go ahead and fix a meeting of both the boy and the girl where they could talk to each other. Even in arranged marriages, courtship was allowed in many cases after proposal fixing or engagement until marriage. However, this particular generation three respondent is one of the few exceptions.

Paid Work: Women from generation one were not allowed to do paid work. If at all they did some paid work, it would only to support the family income when needed. They would do things like bidding different types of clothes, stitching or needle work, or tying bandhani. However, they helped a lot in the family clothes dyeing business. Most of them did allied work other than main dyeing like, folding – unfolding, tying – untying, ironing, folding and, arranging, clothes. This was seen in the second generation also that they too did it to support family income only when required. And helped in dyeing business. Then later, most of this allied work would be done in workshops or outsourced to poor women or families. In generation three as well, one can hardly see the trend to work to support or helping in family dyeing business – this became much lesser or almost nil. However, this generation also takes up other paid work because they want to do it since they love to do it, they want to be independent, they want to form their own identity, they want to apply their education and skills learnt. And in many cases, they are allowed to pursue their careers. For some they have to give up their careers after marriage, a few continue.

This respondent from the second generation did paid work. It was for three months after completing her home science course of teacher's training. She joined in place of her teacher in that institute who was on medical leave. Her father was not permitting her to do it. He did not like it. She had to request and persuade him a lot. She told him that she has worked very hard for the past two years for this course. She pleaded him to allow her so that she could apply her knowledge and learn and understand more. He finally relented and agreed since it was in the same college from where she did the course.

Many women, for example, the second generation respondent's elder sister in law, was a homemaker for many years, after her marriage. Since some years, she is helping her husband in managing his business and shops because he is alone. This respondent think that once their son becomes old enough to help his father with it, she will step back.

Permission and Restrictions: According to this generation two respondent, a major difference in her generation and generation three that can be seen is that, she had to ask for everything. Her daughter on the other hand tells her. Anyway, as she has mentioned that her daughter wants to have things her way. So, maybe now, parents are more open to the idea that the children can have it their way. However, everything is in consultation with the parents. Their convincing too yields results though in a little difficult way.

The generation three respondent says,

“Being a twenty two year old, I do not think I need permission from anyone to go anywhere. I have to inform my family that I will be home in so and so time. However, I have never been allowed to go for an overnight stay. I may be coming home at two in the night but I have to be back home.

I am allowed to dress up the way I like to. There are no such restrictions on me. It is my choice and decision to choose my attire. Earlier (during school and college days) I would just listen to my relatives, blindly, they are saying this, so it must be correct. Later and now, I do not like giving this authority to anybody else other than myself to take any decision for and about me. Because, I believe I am an adult individual and I can take my own decisions. I do not like people interfering with my decisions. If I feel there is something very big and I need to talk about it to my family then I bring it to their notice and take their advice. However, if I have to plan a dinner, I would not ask my mother if I could go. I tell I will be back home by this time and I go.

During my college time, I always had this in my mind that there are a particular number of years for me to get married. I did not want to sit at home and just learn cooking. I wanted to do something in my life. I thought that I do not know what my life would be like after my marriage. I may or may not work outside the home. So, before that I just wanted to experience paid work and that independent feeling. So, I was given a job in the office of my family business. However, they would all pamper me and treat me like a child there and I thought I am simply sitting here and not getting to learn much any further. Then after sometime, I was adamant and left this job and took up a job in an advertising firm. My close relatives, not my immediate family, were not keen on me doing a job (paid work). Because they have this age old thinking that a woman should just be in the house and not work outside. More so, since we are well-off, our women have no scarcity of resources so there is no need for them to go and earn money. After some time, I stopped bothering what they thought. I was determined and convinced that I want to do it, I will do it and I did it. Then they accepted the fact that she does a job. And that she is home by seven thirty - eight in the evening. That is the deadline. They do not like, me working till late. If there is too much work and I have to work beyond this time, they get a little paranoid. So then, I keep them informed on the phone that I will be back home by so and so time. I work in an advertising agency and timings are sometimes odd.”

Conclusion

This is an example of the changing lives of the Khatri women in this neighbourhood. Increase in education levels and exposure over the years has played an important role in bringing about changes in their lives. However, there are certain aspects that still remain the same. They have to use certain tactics to ensure they get what they want, either through persuasion or sharing limited aspects about their lives for certain times, with the extended family who are a part of the neighbourhood. Those who lived lives in a lot of restriction and control make sure that their next generation does not have to live the same way. They do not think of what others in the neighbourhood will say. They try to bring about whatever changes they can at their own individual and familial levels. More so, a lot of other women in the neighbourhood and community do the same. Personal is Political. Therefore, whenever and wherever women have the power and agency, to change the power dynamics, moving away from the patriarchal, domination and suppression they have been enduring, they do exercise it.

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