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Interrogating gender in an urban village: A study of Munirka village

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Abstract

Aim: Present study attempts to understand that how does the setting of a social space shapes perception of gender and sexuality. The location of the field of the study is urban village of munirka south west Delhi. The quantitative research design includes research techniques such as participant observation, open-ended questioner. A comparative method has been used to understand the process of construction of perceptions in modern times. A reflexive method is helpful to decipher the contextual meaning.

Keywords: Gender, space, identity etc.

Introduction

Significance of the topic of the (Why this topic)

Munirka is an urban village in South West Delhi, located near Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IIT Delhi) Campuses. Its neighborhood consists of JNU campus on south, Vasant vihar on North-West, RK Puram on northern side and IIT campus and Bersarai on south-eastern front. The Outer ring road forms the north to east boundary of this and also making it accessible. The nearest metro station is Hauz Khas. Munirka as the area of research was quite interesting because it helped me to contrast how the transition of a village space to urban space locates women. Do women become victims of such a transition or does urban space open new avenues for females to explore. Through techniques like participant-observation, systematic observation and interview schedule I got an overall picture that the urban village Munirka was not a uniform space, rather it was ghettoized on the basis of peoples identity. Women seemed to occupy the negotiating spaces where they were adjusting with the lived reality rather than asserting their choice as they wished to. This was evident in one of the open-ended where a woman choose to stay in an open sort of area than 'a dark-galli' since it gave them security. Thus, the very space of Munirka was so compartmentalized that it demarcated certain areas as prohibited for women as such. Even the questions on who are responsible or perpetrators of sexual violence, majority (including women) said that women are equally responsible since they are 'loose-enough to let themselves out at odd hours'. Thus, my research attempts to understand how an urban-village space of Munirka attempts to construct gender identity and how free-floating these constructions are.

Objective

This research is aimed at exploring and describing multiple aspects of gender within the urban-village setting of Munirka. My aim to know the perception of gender and sexuality within the social space of an urban village and how such a perception gets reproduced within social structure of Munirka. We aim to look at the dynamics of gender using various methods of social research. We are trying to combine the empirical finding with the reality of gender as it exists within the Urban Village we are trying to study.

This research is to focus on the broad dimensions of gender i am looking at.

- Occupation
- Marriage
- Family
- Education
- Sexuality.

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- Violence
- Public sphere

Based on these broad themes we attempted to frame our research questions.

Specific Research Questions

1. How are gender and sexuality understood and practiced by the people in their day to day life?
2. How is masculinity and femininity understood by the people?
3. How is such an understanding played out in the family affairs?
4. What is the prevalence of gender related violence in Munirka and what are the responses for them?
5. What is level of participation of women (in relation to men) in public affairs and institutions?
6. How is the idea of third gender understood and responded to by the people?
7. How does the gender question get reflected in relation to the migrants?

If Any Specific Context

- a. The research conducted essentially included the observation of the site of research. The observation also included 'participant-observation'.
- b. I also interacted with them through an 'open-ended' questionnaire to know a pattern of social reality as it existed in relation to our questions.

Methodology

An important step in the formulation of a research design is the selection of an appropriate methodology. This part of research design outlines the entire research plan. It describes just what must be done, how it will be done, what data will be needed, what data gathering devices will be employed, how sources of data will be selected and how the data will be analyzed and conclusion reached. Selection of proper research method is very crucial.

The research conducted essentially included the observation of the site of research. The observation also included 'participant-observation' I interacted with them through an 'open-ended' questionnaire to know a pattern of social reality as it existed in relation to our questions. Sample size drawn from the Munirka market (2), DDA shopping complex (3), Munirka thekka (2) and Pal Dairy (3). Total sample size-10.

Participant observation allows the understanding of the world from subjective point of view thereby enables the researcher to delve deeper into the subjective reality of the subjects (s)he wants to study. Because the researchers experience many of the same events as observed, they are better able to put themselves in their position and to understand why they interact with others in a particular way. To weigh the significance of participant observation I would like to quote Whyte "As I sat and listened, I learned the answers to the questions I would I would not have had the sense to ask if I had been getting my information solely on an interviewing basis." (Whyte, 1955)

The final part of my methodology was conducting a structured Interview. Interview becomes all the more relevant because it allows a sense of collaboration between the interviewer and interviewee. Further the engagement which happens over an interview schedule helps one to

break the hierarchy between the interviewer and the interviewed.

Within the systematic observation as well as within interview schedule we tried to place questions which bring out women's self. Questions like 'who is your ideal woman? What is your opinion about gender issues?' Etc. was an attempt to put forth the women's voice.

Research Findings /Analysis

Interaction 1: She was the lady outside the grocer shop selling religious goods. Since it was Navratra time the shop was a recently installed as an extension to the grocer shop. It was interesting for me to observe that religious festivals brought women within the public sphere, who otherwise are totally confined within the chores of domesticity. I also observed that the presence of women shopkeeper attracted more customer particularly women, which reflected upon the fact that religion is considered as the exclusive domain of women. In line with this we also interacted with an old lady selling clay idols by the street side. What interesting thing she revealed to us was that she otherwise used to engage only in domestic household work but during the time of festivity she came out within market space to make up 'some money'.

During evening hours, I went to a garment shop, where I found a women owner. What intrigued me more was that the lady had the milk can by her side. I found it interesting because even when women are given the responsibility of the public sphere, they are never allowed to part themselves off from the confines of domesticity. Further, a woman's exposure to the public space is only an aberration or out of some compulsion rather than bringing the sense of emancipation per se. In this regard I would like to cite one more interaction which I had with a woman in a sweet shop. On interrogating her, that as she is sharing the working space of her husband whether she would like her husband to share the domestic work? To this she responded that why will a man do domestic chores. To her men within domestic chores was almost unacceptable.

What I observed by interacting and staying with these women was that each of them talked substantially over the aspects like education, equality, rights etc., but when it came to actual application of these principles in their daily life these idealized principles were often relegated. On ground, women were essentially tasked to do were tasks related to domestic activities.

Interaction 2: The other women whom I met were working in the Pizza shop, Beauty Parlor, shops meant for selling women stuffs like cosmetics and undergarments. I stood in these shops and observed for quite some time and also I posed some open-ended questions to them. When I enquired what their opinion about sexual violence on streets was, they responded that it happens only when 'women give chance'. When I further enquired how do women 'give chance' a women in shop responded that one comes to know about it by the sense of their dressing, makeup and even walking style. They argued that women who are more vulnerable to sexual abuse put on '...cheap makeup, wear small clothes, walk like sluts on streets'. When I interacted with the women in parlor (who had put on heavy make-up) she said she felt secure on streets because their shop had a good reputation.

One needs to critically reflect on these statements made by women since many of the observations made and statements

listened to clearly reflect the deep sense of patriarchy that women often internalize. It was also important to note here that many times the criticism of women came from women themselves. One can understand such tension between women themselves as conflicting ideas which exists between women who internalize patriarchy and those who refuse to do so. Patriarchy thus safeguards itself by vanguarding their ideologies by women themselves.

Interaction 3: In my third interaction I went to a house where an elderly couple was sitting. Initially, they refused to talk to, however they agreed later when we insisted a little. I found talking with the old lady interesting because it came in stark contrast with what his husband was saying. Since I was there as a participant-observant with set of open-ended questions I could sense through an hour long interaction that what the man was saying was only the 'ideal' or what/how it should be and not as he wanted them to be. While the old man talked about the equality, educating women, giving them freedom etc., it was contradictory to what he practiced. This was evitable from the set of questions we asked him on marriage, dressing style, freedom to choose spouse etc. The couple made some strong statements like 'stalking is not a crime'. Also they were quite polemical when it came to dressing pattern. They were 'racist' enough to say that "Manipuri wear shorts, it is their culture". Further, when we tried talking to them about government provisions for controlling atrocities against women, they said that '...government cannot do anything it is men's sanskara which can bring about changes.'

It is interesting to analyze that morality plays a crucial role in framing thinking process of the society. However, the depressing fact is that this morality is often male-centric and is guided by patriarchal norms. Anything which obfuscates the male-centricism and male-ethos is seen by society as a deviance. Women are often made the fore-runners and caretakers of the patriarchal norms by internalizing them and projecting such ideology onto their children. In my observation, I noticed that while the old man tried to moralize upon gender roles and practice by giving rational argument, the old woman completely submitted to it without any argument, as if she has been denied off her rationality and to rationalize was the sole prerogative of the 'patriarch' of the family. Even while conducting the Interview schedule I made a similar kind of observation.

Interaction 4: My next set of interaction included women from the north-eastern part of the country. It is interesting to mention here that most of the north-eastern women I met were moving in a group; unlike the others were single women movement was seen in large numbers as well. This observation gave me a sense that the north-easterners face a sense of apprehension being alone. This was clearer when I attempted interacting with them. One of the women from Nagaland stated that when she passed people passed comment like momo, chinki, chowmien. She also told that the landlords often refused to give them rented room when they looked at 'her face'. Further, they have to constantly migrate from one part of Delhi to other because of the fear of being attacked. She revealed to us that recently they were being vacated from Kathiawar Sarai. The other north-eastern women whom I met said that north-easterners were looked down upon, because they looked "Different". Particularly during the time of festival like Holi they were targeted. A north-east woman told that they were more vulnerable for stalking when compared to the commoners.

It is also significant to know the perspective non-north east women about the north-east women. This observation came up with a lot of surprise for the reason non-north east women were most vocal in criticizing the north-easterners, as a threat to their "Culture". I had a longish conversation with a Christian women who polemically criticized them for open drinking, prostitution, wearing indecent cloths, staying live-in etc. she said within the market space like Munirka there is no dearth of work, but the Manipuris(that is what she referred north-eastern women as) want easy way out so they promote prostitution.

In all my interactions, when I tried to make a conversation about the LGBT community people was hesitant to talk about it or they regarded it as a "Gross Sin" according to their religious pretexts.

As participant observer in shops, within households, on streets I observed that women engaged in activities and social groups/ institutions which were quite different from that of men. For instance, even if a woman was working in a shop she was engaged in selling a specific type of commodity, which was related to woman like cosmetics, undergarments, sanitary napkins etc. Further, as participant observer I also observed that while women as saleswoman have to pay special attention on their looks by appearing 'Gaudy', such an appearance preference was lacking in men. Meanwhile I was a participant observation I also asked some open ended questions to people whom I was observing. My interactions through open-ended questions are mentioned above as Interaction 1, 2, 3, 4. Open-ended questionnaire enabled me to cover wide range of issues which I would not have otherwise covered through interview schedule.

I also constructed an observation table to systematically gather information. These observations further helped me to capture a sense of reality. What the observation table also helped me to understand was that the very spaces in which women were seen reflected upon the tasks they were engaged in. In my first observation at Pal dairy the majority of women were single traditionally clad and came to buy stuffs at dairy stuffs for household/domestic purposes. The women at Munirka market were also engaged in similar kind of tasks. But within Munirka market women who were single were also dressed in formal fully clad dresses. One can thus draw an inference that within market spaces women have more outlets of occupying public sphere, unlike a ghettoized village space where women identity as a housekeeper is kept sacrosanct.

I further observed during evening time or by night the number of 'women in group' and 'women with male' increased. This reflects upon the apprehension women face with streets getting darker. I also found it interesting to observe that out of the observed sample only 10% of the women were in shorts/ one-piece. However, when question was asked that whether the individuals considered dress as an important factor for sexual violence against women majority of them agreed. This was ironical to the degree that though the majority of the observed were fully clad, it was minor 10% who were responsible for dooming the morality of society. Further, it was also interesting to note that while sexual violence within Munirka was a common experience (to which people at large agreed to), ironically the reason for this common experience was uncommon 'provocative dressing pattern'. Therefore, one needs to reflect upon this social reality that whether dresses worn are per se

responsible for gender violence or they are made as the loophole by society to justify such a social malice.

Systematic Observation

I observed that at which location how many women are present. Further, I also observed that whether each of them is alone, in a group or with a male member. I also systematically observed that whether the women are in fully clad modern dress, fully clad traditional dress, in shorts or one piece or are they in formal.

Conceptual Framework

In my research on gender “Reflexivity” was the tipping point. Reflexivity is central to social research because it defines the agenda and intention behind the research. It presumes that carrying a research is not a vacuous exercise rather it bears within its ambit a sense of emancipation and political intention. The literature review thus done by me were those which were more and more reflexive and which attempted to understand the plight of women through their everyday lived experience. It included “The Womb of Mind” and “Women Reborn” by Renuka Singh, “May you be the mother of hundred sons” by Elisabeth Bumiller. All these works include elaborate case studies reflecting upon women’s life. It also takes up issues concerning women like sexual violence, domestic violence, dowry deaths etc. Foucault’s insight that sexuality is endowed with greatest instrumentality and is amenable to most varied strategies also helps us to understand relationships. Thus, having sexual and emotional access to women only on women’s terms coupled with women’s indifference towards men is what perturbs men most.

Conclusion

This particular study conducted in Munirka on “*Interrogating Gender in an Urban Village: A Study of Munirka Village*” suggest that there is an inherent contradiction within the structure and functioning of the social organisation. On one side its said to be a modern democratic welfare social formation for general public but at the same time it reflects a strong resilience to the traditional Khap panchayat of the Indian villages when we talk about its composition, decision-making, inclusivity etc. There is interplay of traditions and modernity in the structure of village which on the one hand shows its feudal character and other side also shows its adherence to modern democratic welfare values.

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