Article

DIOGENES

Diogenes
2022, Vol. 63(3–4) 111–122
Copyright © ICPHS 2018
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0392192117740042
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio

'What will the neighbours say?': Legitimacy, Social Control and the Sociocultural Influence of Neighbourhoods in India

Janaki Abraham
University of Delhi, India

Abstract

This article focuses on the everyday practices that make the place of the neighbourhood – social control, legitimacy and support, while also looking at how gender is produced in everyday life in the neighbourhood. In doing this, the discussion underlines the tremendous social and cultural influence of neighbours and the neighbourhood and argues that neighbourhoods need to be seen as a social formation as important as caste, class, ethnicity or religion. This is particularly important given that a strong focus on identities in recent decades has tended to eclipse social formations such as the neighbourhood. This ethnographic discussion is based on fieldwork carried out in neighbourhoods in two towns in India, Thalassery in Kerala, South India and Bikaner in Rajasthan, North India.

Keywords

neighbourhood, neighbours, gender, cultural influence, social control, legitimacy, Kerala, Bikaner

'What will the neighbours say' was a comment I often heard articulated in different ways when doing fieldwork in both Bikaner, Rajasthan and in Thalassery, North Kerala. People would relate stories in which neighbours censured, commented, gossiped or advised. Neighbours appeared to be strong guardians of the norms and rules in the area and exercised considerable social control. They were also important players at weddings, at the time of a death or in everyday life when support was needed.

My interest in the social and cultural influence of neighbours and neighbourhoods emerged while doing fieldwork in both areas. In particular, in Bikaner I was struck by the starkly different neighbourhood cultures in relation to women's veiling and segregation in two predominantly

Corresponding author:
Janaki Abraham, Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi (North Campus), Delhi, 110007, India.
Email: janaki.abraham@gmail.com

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192117740042 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Muslim neighbourhoods in the walled city. In contrast to what seems to be an over-emphasis on caste, class, ethnic or religious identity at the cost of other influences, I would like to argue in this essay that neighbourhoods need to be taken seriously as a social formation crucial to social life and as important arenas of social and cultural influence.

This is not to say that there have not been important studies of neighbourhoods. The disciplines of anthropology, sociology and geography have long traditions of scholarship on neighbourhoods that go back to the Chicago School, also known as the Ecological school in urban studies. Scholars such as Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1921) argued that the city could be likened to an eco-system and that both social structure and the environment influenced human behaviour. With the creation and growth of several cities in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, scholars were concerned about the changes in the quality of neighbourhoods in urban areas and the implications of this (Wirth, 1938). One strong strand of work followed Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (translated often as community and society), and lamented the loss of community in new urban neighbourhoods (for a review, see Schwirian, 1983). Several studies of the time focused on particular neighbourhoods and their peculiarities. Of these, Foote Whyte's study of a predominantly Italian neighbourhood in Boston (1943) remains a classic neighbourhood study.

Urban studies in India for decades after Independence tended to focus on development and the process of urbanisation (see for example Rao, 1991). In the 1990s this gave way to an interest in globalisation particularly in large cities (see, for example, the urban reader edited by Patel & Deb, 2006). These foci tended to eclipse the relevance of the neighbourhood.[1] What is particularly missing is a focus on the neighbourhood as a social formation as important as caste, class, ethnicity or religion.

Looking back at scholarship in India it is clear that the focus of colonial anthropology on castes, tribes or religious groups and particularly those who were the 'exotic' other has had long-standing implications. The tomes of work produced by colonial officials on the 'Castes and Tribes' of different parts of India gave a primacy to these identity aspects and saw the population of India as marked out in these categories. In post-Independence India, caste, tribe and religious groupings remained important while the focus was predominantly on understanding the village, its social organisation and changes in it. India was to be studied in its villages, where a majority of its people lived. The focus was on caste sociality and the neighbourhood tended to be seen as a default locale. While there were some studies on towns in the 1960s and 1970s (see for example Doshi, 1974, and Vatuk, 1972) this approach was marginalised by the buzz about globalisation in the 1990s which, as I have mentioned, brought with it a focus on the large metropolis.[2]

At the same time, the focus on what were considered the primordial ties of caste, kinship community and region remained. It was with labour studies that scholars such as Rajnarayan Chandavarkar argued that such a focus obscured the extent to which the 'culture' of migrant workers 'was also informed by work and by politics, and indeed, by the daily struggles of workplace and neighbourhood' (1997: 187).

Through a discussion of everyday life in neighbourhoods in Thalassery and Bikaner I seek to explore the implications of people living close to each other in a proximity that allows face-to-face interactions of various kinds, and sensorial interactions – of sights, sounds and smells. I focus in particular on everyday practices that make the place of the neighbourhood – social control, legitimacy, support and the production of gender in everyday life. I do so in view of the great social and cultural influence of the neighbourhood.

The fieldwork on which I draw was done at different times and was part of different projects. Fieldwork in Thalassery in North Kerala in South India was part of a doctoral project that focused on a specific caste group (the Thiyyas) and its history of matrilineal kinship and inheritance. In my

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192117740042 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ongoing project in Bikaner I seek to understand how spaces in the town are gendered. This focus on towns is explained by the understanding that towns are the site of dramatic social change in India and that they have not received adequate attention.[3]

Gender, legitimacy and social control in two neighbourhoods in Thalassery

The town of Tellicherry (now Thalassery), famous for its pepper, lies on the northern coastline of Kerala. The town has areas with concentrations of people belonging to various castes and communities, including a small group of people near one of the main market streets who claim Portuguese descent and still speak Portuguese. By and large, the caste/community concentration tends to be particularly pronounced in areas around places of worship associated with a specific caste or religious community, like a temple or a mosque. Dramatic changes have taken place in the town in terms of housing and, in turn, in the kinds of neighbourhoods. In recent times, a number of high rise apartments and gated colonies have been built for the well-to-do, many of whom work outside Kerala, often in the Persian Gulf. I did intensive fieldwork starting from 1996, in two older neighbourhoods. One, Pattamkunnu[4], in the municipality area, was predominantly middle class and comprised houses belonging to people of different castes and religious groups. Devaloor, the second neighbourhood, was adjacent to the town, in what is technically part of a village area governed by a *panchayat* (local governing body). It is far more mixed in terms of class and has a majority of Thiyya households (this is the caste that I studied for my Doctoral research). In this neighbourhood there are strong kinship networks as a result of the partition of property among kin over several generations. A comparison between the two areas helps to draw out the distinctiveness of each.

The layout of houses in the two areas differed significantly and had a bearing on the nature of the neighbourhood. In Pattamkunnu, houses tended to be set apart, built on raised ground (often 4–8 feet above the road) and generally had a large area surrounding the house with a garden and lots of trees. They also generally had compound walls and an independent entrance from the road or lane with an iron gate. However, there was no uniformity in either the size of plots or in the proximity of houses. In some pockets there were small plots of land and the houses were interconnected both spatially and through kinship ties.

In Devaloor, houses were by and large closer to each other, and in the 1990s very few had compound walls, and paths often passed from right in front of houses, resulting in a greater visibility and interaction. Thus, when a person walked past houses they generally greeted those sitting outside on the veranda or at a shop saying '*varate*' or '*pote*' – asking permission to go (and return). In spite of a dramatic increase in the construction of houses in both areas, in Devaloor there were still some open tracts of agricultural land on which different kinds of gram, vegetables and rice were grown.

In both neighbourhoods, neighbours were often friends and were the people among whom everyday interaction took place. In Devaloor, as a neighbour walked in front of a house s/he would greet a person who was outside the house or was visible from the outside and might stop to talk. Women from neighbouring houses could often be seen (and heard) standing at the side door to the kitchen and exchanging news about their houses and daily events. They also often dropped in to buy coconuts, drum sticks (a vegetable) or red spinach growing in the garden. Children ran in and out of houses as would young adults. In the part of Pattamkunnu where the houses were more set apart and neighbours did not have to walk in front of the front door to go to their house, interaction often took place across the back wall or by dropping in.

In Pattamkunnu people spoke about the number of large *tharavads* that had been partitioned or sold, or that were lying locked up; old people, in particular, lamented the eroded kinship and friendship networks. The sense of isolation was often explained by pointing out that a large number

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192117740042 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of houses being sold in the open market had resulted in the diminishing number of kin or fellow caste members nearby. Yet there was a strong sense that neighbours were important and that good relations must be maintained with neighbours because in a moment of crisis they were the ones who would be closest. Such interdependence generally cut across religious groups, particularly among the younger generation who enjoyed close friendships.

Of course, some neighbours were closer than others but, by and large, there was a sense that demands could be made on neighbours. Madhavi, for example, would call her neighbour from the house behind to tie up a coconut tree that was leaning dangerously on one side. In Devaloor, when Narayani had to go house to house inviting neighbours, she took with her a neighbour's son, given the convention that in a house men invite men and women invite women. Weddings or deaths are occasions when neighbours help a lot. Neighbours would play a critical role in making arrangements for different events involved in a wedding. When I was doing fieldwork in the late 1990s, on the day of the wedding different neighbours (and relatives) could be seen around the 'wedding house' performing several functions that have now been taken over by professionals. For example, professionals are now brought in to put up a tent covering the exterior of the house and for serving food. Neighbours were and continue to be equally crucial in providing support at the time of a death. They help with arrangements that need to be made and may take turns cooking food to send to the house where the death has occurred.

Moreover, before loans from financial institutions of different kinds became available, neighbours would often play an important role in helping someone raise money to finish building a house. Neighbours would be invited to a *payattu,* a gathering at which financial assistance was sought. Those who came gave whatever they could afford and the amount was written down. When someone else held a similar gathering in order to seek financial assistance, those who had received from that person, were obliged to reciprocate with at least as much. Such gatherings were no longer practiced in the 1990s.

What was clear in the late 1990s was that the space of the neighbourhood had changed considerably. In Pattamkunnu several old houses had been sold or demolished and there were some pockets in the neighbourhood which ceased to be spaces in which people knew each other well and had a feeling of shared time. In Devaloor there was still a strong network of people belonging to the same caste, and kinship networks remained strong. However, what had changed was the marking out of individual property with compound walls and gates. In some cases, the latter made old paths leading through someone's house appear as trespassing, though walls could be taller when separating a property from the road but short when bordering a neighbour's compound. This has enabled the continuation of the kind of to-and-fro that I have described. The feature that dramatically affects the quality of the neighbourhood is that women (and also men) inherit property from their parents and this means that a woman may continue to live near her kin even after her marriage.[5] As I will discuss later, this is in sharp contrast with Bikaner where women unfortunately still rarely inherit parental property and where it is unheard of, or at least rare, for a man to set up house in his wife's *mohalla*.

It will now be useful to look at the neighbourhood as a space in which legitimacy is sought and in which social control is exercised. Neighbours are an important presence at marriage negotiations. At the wedding ceremony itself when there was no priest,[6] the *nattu mukhyasthan* (literally village headman or an elder in the neighbourhood) performed the ceremony.[7] The presence of neighbours was important in legitimising the ritual. At least one neighbour other than a relative would be present even at the ceremony where the intention to marry was decided and a wedding date fixed. Furthermore, while prior to fixing a marriage it is considered important to get the approval of certain relatives, it is also important to inform and seek the approval of some close neighbours.[8] These practices underline the importance of the neighbourhood in everyday life. In

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192117740042 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Thalassery the specificities of the local customs, especially those pertaining to marriage, were strongly articulated – ‘In our place we do it like this’. Thus, especially where caste and community overlapped there was a strong sense of shared customs.

However, the way in which norm and rules are enforced has changed significantly. Until the 1930s or 1940s there were caste groupings in clusters of administrative units in which the eldest male from large and prestigious matrilineal joint family houses (*tharavads*) would gather and hear cases. Depending on the nature of the offence, people were fined, punished or in some cases ex-communicated. In this sense, the local level was the effective unit of the caste and caste control – the geographic size of the unit deciding the case seems to have depended on the nature of the case (see Bordia, 2015).

The *kutil*, a place in Devaloor where disputes used to be settled by a group of heads of important *tharavads*, is now only used for a ritual that takes place during the annual temple festival. The old system of dispute management has been displaced by other institutions and players, most notably government-run courts. However, in some cases the attempt is made to resolve problems at the local level. Party leaders play an important role in this. Although I cannot detail the complex ways in which this is done, I would like to stress that households in a neighbourhood are united not only through their relationship to, say, a local temple, as in Devaloor, but also through secular aspects of everyday life such as politics and the role played by local-level political players in settling disputes or in garnering support by providing various kinds of assistance.

In everyday life the control that the neighbourhood has the potential to exercise is expressed in the comment, ‘*natkar enthu parayum?*’ (what will the neighbours say?). I often also heard the comment, *‘nattukar verude parayum’* (they will talk unnecessarily). Social behaviour is controlled by the fear of ‘comments’[9] or rumours in the neighbourhood.

One day, while talking to Priya, an unmarried woman in her thirties, about how beautiful the *chuttuvilakku* at the local temple was (when all the oil lamps are lit), she said she and her sisters had once gone to see it at night. They were the only women there and were asked more than once if they were sponsoring the *chuttuvilakku (‘ningal kaipikan ondo*?’). She expressed a sense of shame at that question ‘… *namukku kuravu ayi poyi’* (‘this made us feel small … to feel shame’). As was explained to me by someone else, the implication in the above question, was that women would be there at night only if they were sponsoring the lamps being lit in the temple. In other words, what was being questioned was *why* these women were there at night – a clear articulation of the boundaries that women should not cross.

A strong normative idea of dress and adornment, body language and interactions has shaped the production of the ‘respectable woman’ in everyday life in Kerala.[10] The importance of such a performance of respectability[11] in the neighbourhood was underlined by the fact that a large number of marriage proposals emanated from local social relationships.

Gossip is one of the mechanisms by which social control is garnered in a neighbourhood that is closely knit and characterised by frequent interaction. I often witnessed hushed conversations about someone or another, as when I overheard people commenting on the news that a young unmarried woman had been seen at a bus stand speaking to three men!

Devaloor is centred on a temple where the ritual art form *theyyam* is enacted. The annual festival during which *theyyam* is performed is seen as an enactment of the epic called the Ramayana, centred on Lord Rama. This festival is seen as a male affair, despite women’s work being critical in preparing the house for the festival and for receiving several visitors. Men are supposed to observe abstinence during this time and are to cook their own simple food. For the four days of the festival when there are *theyyam* performances men walk around the temple, even small boys are carried around on someone’s shoulder, holding a long stick, unmistakably phallic, symbolising Rama’s bow and arrow. This annual festival is central to the neighbourhood’s shared identity and to the

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192117740042 Published online by Cambridge University Press

shared pride people take in it and in the temple. It is also critical to the ways gender is constituted. In the next section on Bikaner I will elaborate on the distinct ways in which gender is produced in everyday life in the neighbourhood.

Neighbourhoods are thus constituted through a variety of practises: reciprocity, friendship, worship, control or violence.[12] Neighbourhoods need to be seen as constituted differently at different times and around different everyday and non-everyday events. Most important, it is the proximity of living that is characteristic of neighbourhoods; a proximity which entails a sensory engagement with others that may include face-to-face interaction and critically, sights, smells of food cooking[13] and sounds – of washing clothes in the morning, or the pounding of rice at night (now replaced by the sound of the food mixer in the morning), of arguments or violence. It is this sensorial interaction in everyday life that makes the neighbourhood such a powerful influence in people's lives.

The production of gender in neighbourhoods in Bikaner

I began research on gender and space in Bikaner town in 2007 in a situation in which towns in India were undergoing dramatic social change and much of the research in urban studies was focused on big cities. I started by looking at different 'public' spaces – the street and chowk, the cinema hall, places of worship and so on. However, having realised that neighbourhood spaces in Bikaner were sharply organised on the basis of caste, class and religion, it became clear that beginning with a neighbourhood study would enable a more complex understanding of space in the town.

When I set out to study townscapes through the practice of veiling I found that neighbourhoods were critical. I asked what a gendered mapping of Bikaner would look like from the perspective of practices of *ghunghat* and *purdah*; that is, respectively Hindu and Muslim forms of veiling in North India.[14] The critical feature of Hindu veiling is that only married women veil in the presence of their husbands and elder in-laws and in the neighbourhood of their in-laws (*sasural*). Veiling is an expression of deference and broadly, as Ursula Sharma wrote, is best understood as a 'means of controlling the behaviour of in-marrying women' (1978: 219). Thus, irrespective of caste, the kinship relationship that a Hindu woman has to people in her neighbourhood is critical to her observance of veiling. Walking with a woman through the walled city, one can observe the shifting relationship that she has with different 'public' spaces and different neighbourhoods. On a number of occasions for example, when walking with Radha, a Brahmin woman in her thirties and the mother of two school-going boys, through different neighbourhoods, I observed sharp shifts in her observance of veiling and body language. Radha would ensure that her head was well covered when she stepped out of her husband's house,[15] and constantly re-covered her head when her sari *pallu* slipped off.[16] However, when we entered the *mohalla* or neighbourhood of her *pihir* (neighbourhood of her parent's house)[17] she did not bother to pull the sari *pallu* back up to cover her head. Her whole persona also seemed to change[18] – she talked openly and animatedly with people she met on the road, including men, both younger and older. In this neighbourhood, she was a daughter and a sister – fictive or otherwise. The only situation in which a woman observes *ghunghat* in her parents' house is when her husband or an elder in-law is with her. Her covering her head in this context is a sign of deference to her husband. Thus, in the walled city in Bikaner where marriages often take place within the town, across neighbourhoods, a woman's status as a daughter (*beti*) or a daughter-in-law (*bahu*) influences whether she veils and her whole demeanour, her body language, with whom and how she speaks, who she makes eye contact with, how animated she is when she speaks and so on.

However, widespread migration from the town of Bikaner has altered both the quality of neighbourhoods and the practices of veiling. Women who live outside Bikaner may not veil when they

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192117740042 Published online by Cambridge University Press

visit Bikaner. In some cases, the nature of the neighbourhood has altered so much as a result of migration that a mother-in-law may tell a daughter-in-law that she need not observe *ghunghat* because 'no one has remained in the neighbourhood'. Thus the sharp contrast between one's mother's neighbourhood and that of one's in-laws is altered by who inhabits these neighbourhoods at a given time.[19] The importance of who inhabits a space at a given time is critical to the understanding that the gendered nature of spaces changes through the 24 hours of a day (see for example Ranade, 2007 for a discussion of spaces in Mumbai).

The significance of neighbourhood culture was brought home to me by the contrast between two predominantly Muslim *mohallas* in the walled city in Bikaner. In one, the Choongaron Mohalla, there was 100 percent literacy and a very high number of women who had finished school had completed teacher training courses and had become school teachers. In the other *mohalla* – the Churigarh – most girls had studied only till the 8th grade and then waited to get married.

The fact that many women attain higher education and work as teachers in the Choongaron Mohalla is seen as a key factor in altering the culture of *purdah*, practised as seclusion and clothing. This culture of the neighbourhood[20] that stresses education for women is traced back to two women known to have been the first Muslim girls to go to school in Bikaner and then, as adults, the first to get jobs as teachers. They set an example that was followed by many women in the *mohalla*.

In the discussion of practices of *purdah*, variations based on the different sects and regional communities of those who follow Islam have been pointed out (Jeffery, 1979; Khan, 2007, Vatuk, 1982), but the differences based on the history and culture of a neighbourhood have received insufficient attention. The difference in veiling regimes were what was particularly significant about the two neighbourhoods under consideration.

Sakina Begum, born in the late 1920s, recalled how her mother fought opposition to her attending school and how she continued to study at a time when Muslim girls were not encouraged to go to school. She said that her mother would tell her that she should cover her head so that 'no one will speak' and would send her to school through the by-lanes so that few people would see her. Sakina Begum said she had always covered her head – as a student and, later, as a teacher. Hers was a strategy to open up spaces to study and work while preventing people from talking. However, she repeatedly told me that she never forced her daughters or daughters-in-law to cover their head.

Sakina Begum passed her matriculation examination in 1945 and got a job in one of the best schools in Bikaner soon after. Then, in the 1950s, she went on one year's paid leave to Jaipur, the Rajasthan state capital, to obtain her Senior Teaching Certificate (STC). Later, while teaching at the school, she did a Bachelor's degree and then obtained a Master's in English literature. In the 1970s, Sakina Begum became involved in adult education in Bikaner. She taught voluntary literacy classes at night in the *mohalla* and encouraged and helped many girls and women to gain an education and get jobs as teachers. Some of the women she taught were young Hindu widows in the *mohalla*, who were struggling to bring up their children with no independent income. She told me that these women's lives were transformed through education and subsequent employment.

Amina Begum, who is a year younger than Sakina Begum, recalled seeing Sakina Begum go to school and decided that she wanted to go too. She was around 7 or 8 years old at the time – a little older than others in her class. Sakina and Amina would go together to school and gradually other girls joined in. Amina was married the year she passed Class 8. Her husband's family was quite poor and since she was educated, someone known to her encouraged her to get a job as a teacher. She recalled that on 1 April 1948 she became a school teacher in Bikaner. At the same time, she started tutoring young children in her house. Many young girls would stay with her while they studied. In 1953, Amina went with Sakina to Jaipur to obtain the certificate course. Ten years after she got her job, Amina passed the Class 10 examination as a private student. Amina encouraged her children and many other young girls and women to study; she supported her granddaughter's

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192117740042 Published online by Cambridge University Press

education and when the latter got a job as a teacher, she even travelled with her to the places where she was posted.

Sakina Begum and Amina Begum became active role models for many in the *mohalla*. Their getting an education and employment opened up this possibility for many women. Girls and young women and their families saw that with education a woman could get a 'good' and 'respectable' job as a teacher. This started the snowball effect that has contributed to a *mohalla* culture in which women's education is now the norm, as is women being employed as teachers in schools. This *mohalla* stands out in contrast with others (both Hindu and Muslim) not only in terms of women's education and employment but also in the culture of *purdah*. This is visible in the rhythm of everyday life where one can see women going to work in the morning and returning from school by late afternoon.

By contrast, as I have mentioned, in another *mohalla* in the walled city, as late as 2008 young girls often did not study beyond Class 8, and the two young women I came to know well were both engaged to be married fairly young (17 and 20 years) and did not go out of the house often. In fact, they said they rarely even visited their aunt's house across the main square near the *mohalla*, and only once a year, before Eid, did they go to the Bada Bazaar (main market) in Bikaner. When I spoke to Sara Bano, who was then 20 years old, and her mother about the Choongaron Mohalla and the large number of women teachers there, they said, '*Is mohalla me log jalil hai, unpad hai*' (this *mohalla* is full of uneducated people). The lack of 'educated people' in their *mohalla* meant that education, especially for women, was not encouraged. The neighbourhood was clearly seen as constraining choices and setting a culture of what women could or could not do, including how *purdah* was practised.

This is not to say that the culture of the neighbourhood is produced within this limited locality. Instead, I see the production of the neighbourhood culture as resulting from multiple influences and processes of transformation – local, national and global – which intersect and are negotiated and articulated in rules and in everyday practices; that is, what Arjun Appadurai (1996) refers to as the 'production of locality' and geographers have called 'place-making' (Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999). At the same time, it is important to stress that people negotiate in different ways the constraining effects of a neighbourhood.

Thus, while neighbourhoods may be divided by caste and religion, they are further differentiated on the basis of their culture. While this differentiation may be seen between the walled city and the newer more cosmopolitan 'colonies' in Bikaner, different *mohallas* in the walled city are differentiated on the basis of their history, of their culture of women's education and, linked to this, of veiling practices. Critically, while veiling practices differ across communities, castes and classes, they also vary across neighbourhoods. Therefore, the way in which spaces in a town are gendered and gender is produced in everyday life is strongly linked to the culture of the neighbourhoods.

Taking neighbourhoods seriously

In this essay I have attempted to underline the importance of neighbourhoods through an ethnographic discussion of two towns in India. In contrast to the over-emphasis on identities that has strongly influenced both our academic life and our political life in recent decades, I have argued that it is critical to look at cross-cutting effects in social life such as that of the neighbourhood. These spaces and the relationships in them have the potential of exercising tremendous social and cultural influence.

Neighbourhoods are spaces in which people live together and where there is face-to-face interaction. In the Thalassery and Bikaner neighbourhoods that I have described, there was, in varying

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192117740042 Published online by Cambridge University Press

degrees, an overlap between caste and religious identity and the neighbourhood. In these settings, neighbours played a critical role in everyday life and in important events such as marriage and death. The neighbourhood was also a place in which legitimacy was sought and in which control was exercised. The strong influence of neighbourhoods emerges precisely from the proximity of living and the everyday sensorial interactions between people – the sights, sounds and smells.

In the discussion of the contrast between two neighbourhoods in Bikaner I have highlighted the way in which the sight of a girl going to school, performing respectability by covering her head and walking through by-lanes, inspires others to join her. In Thalassery, a similar influence can be seen in relation to women's choice of subject in higher education; fuelled by the dramatic expansion of private engineering colleges in South India, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of young women going to engineering college. When I asked Madhavi Amma how her son-in-law had decided to send his daughter to engineering school, especially when she did not like science much, she said something that would translate, 'when the neighbour's daughter is going to engineering college, you don't want to be behind'. Neighbours then may present new possibilities; things to be aspired to. Capturing this quality of neighbourhoods, a few years ago a popular television brand ran an advertising campaign labelling the television set it was trying to sell as 'Neighbour's envy'. In Thalassery the influence of neighbours (combined with aggressive advertising) on the nature of home improvement and the use of consumer products was tangible when I walked around the neighbourhood. For example, house exteriors followed fashion, whether it was the latest kind of exterior paint, the colour of paint, stainless steel railings or a new kind of flooring.

Thus, from clothing to home improvement, from women's education to the culture of seclusion, neighbourhoods have the potential of being strong places of influence. At the same time, they are spaces in which identities are produced in everyday life. In this article I have sought to discuss the way neighbourhoods may produce distinct gendered cultures – including traditions in women's education and employment. Equally, class, caste, ethnicity and religious identity are produced in everyday life, often through practices of exclusion or discrimination.[21] Neighbourhoods and neighbours are also characterised by uncertainty, factions or conflict.[22] There is a rich literature on how violence reconstitutes neighbourhoods in multiple ways (see for example Das, 1990; Chatterji & Mehta 2007) and how neighbourhoods come to be constituted through memory (Arif, 2009). Chatterji and Mehta, for example, describe the way the communal violence of 1992–93 in Mumbai 'reconstituted the neighbourhoods on the basis of religious affiliation, emptying them of occupational and religious solidarities' (2007: 16).

Today urban neighbourhoods are highly differentiated and in most of the neighbourhoods that I have discussed here there is a strong overlap of caste or religious or ethnic issues. Further fieldwork will help to investigate how the nature of social and cultural influence changes with alterations in the social composition of neighbourhoods, and with the architecture of buildings and their layout.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Italo Pardo for comments on this paper and for his support. I would also like to thank Yasmeen Arif, Radhika Chopra and Rajni Palriwala for useful conversations.

Notes

1. A notable exception is De Neve & Donner, 2006, which focuses on neighbourhoods in cities and towns in India.
2. There are of course exceptions to this neglect. See, for example, Fox, 1991; Doshi, 1991, and more recently essays by De Neve, 2006; Jeffery et al., 2006; Simpson, 2006 and Frøystad, 2006.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192117740042 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. India's towns have undergone tremendous social change in an increasingly globalised economy with the growth of industries, job opportunities, a globalised media and, most important, a booming consumer culture. Advertisements for large brands that list their showrooms indicate that in addition to the large metropolitan areas, a consumer culture thrives also in towns. In recent years the focus of the Indian government has moved from the view that India's big metro cities could be modelled on Shanghai and Singapore, to one in which towns are the focus of large infrastructural investments.
4. Pattamkunnu and Devaloor are pseudonyms.
5. In the context of Naples, Italo Pardo writes that the proximity in which parents and children live not only contributes to strong bonds between them and between siblings and in-laws, but also affects the 'moral and socio-economic composition of the neighbourhood' (1996: 97).
6. Prior to Sree Narayana Guru's reforms in marriage ritual there was no priest and the ceremony would be conducted by an elder in the neighbourhood, most often of the same caste.
7. In practice, the *nattu mukhyasthan* was an elder in the neighbourhood from the same caste. It is significant that during the anti-Brahman movement in Tamil Nadu substantial changes in terms of caste organisation took place at neighbourhood level. Kathleen Gough describes how in earlier times the headman of the caste of the bride and the groom would witness the exchange of gifts and the amount of bridewealth promised when the marriage was being fixed. In contrast, in the 1950s when Gough did fieldwork in the multi-caste street in Kumbapettai, it was the headman of the street who witnessed the exchanges and promises at the final meeting to arrange the marriage. This, although each caste is still endogamous (Gough, 1971: 41).
8. Even when a decision has been made, it is presented as though seeking approval; thus, respect or consideration is shown and a person's involvement is sought.
9. Like many other English words, the word 'comment' has been incorporated into colloquial Malayalam.
10. For a visual flavour of both sex segregation in everyday life and the performance of respectability see Mukhopadhyay (2007).
11. For a discussion of strategies of performing respectability see Phadke (2007).
12. How the neighbourhoods of Devaloor have been constituted through violence between members of the opposing political parties will, I hope, be the subject of a future paper.
13. One of my most pleasurable sensorial experiences in both neighbourhoods was walking around just after noon amongst the smells of frying fish emanating from houses.
14. A more detailed discussion can be found in Abraham (2010).
15. Women can also be seen to be observing *ghunghat* when they are on their terrace, particularly when older male or female relatives are on adjacent terraces.
16. Both synthetic saris and well-starched cotton saris tend to slip off the head and are therefore constantly being adjusted to keep the head covered.
17. In North India this is also called *maikha*.
18. Vatuk (1972: 112) refers to the contrast between the behaviour of a woman in her natal home and her husband's village as 'a marked double standard of behaviour'.
19. This is true for other spaces as well. Again, when walking with different women I noticed that in market places a woman's sari covering her head may slip off and stay on her shoulder, till she covered her head on seeing a relative of her husband's or approached a shop run by his relative or family friend (with whom she is identified as a daughter-in-law). Hindu veiling practices were then marked not by a divide of 'public' and 'private' but by the nature of kinship relationships in a particular space.
20. In an interesting article on the 'educational environment' in the North Indian town of Bijnor, in Uttar Pradesh, Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffery (2006: 116) write about the 'reliable electricity to let children study in the evenings, good tutors to supplement what is learnt at school, as well as the more diffuse effects produced when all the neighbours' children regularly attend school'. The case of the Choongaron Mohalla will suggest that the implications of a culture in which children attend school regularly is far from widespread.
21. See, for example, Srivastav (2015) for a discussion of anxieties in gated communities of keeping out those perceived as the 'other'.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192117740042 Published online by Cambridge University Press

22. Pardo's (1996) detailed ethnography of the twists and turns of everyday relationships in a neighbourhood in Naples brings out well not only everyday conflicts but also uncertainties that characterise neighbourhoods.

References

Abraham J (2010) Space, gender and veiling in a town in North India: a critique of the public/private dichotomy, *Indian Journal for Gender Studies* 17(2): 191–222.

Appadurai A (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press.

Arif Y (2009) Impossible cosmopolises: dislocations and relocations in Beirut and Delhi. In: S Mayaram (ed.) *The Other Global City*. New York: Routledge, pp. 101–130.

Bordia D (2015) The politics of custom: blood money, disputes, and tribal leadership in Western India, *Diogenes* 60(3–4): 153–165.

Chandavarkar R (1997) 'The Making of the Working Class': E. P. Thompson and Indian history, *History Workshop J.* 43: 177–196.

Chatterji R and Mehta D (2007) *Living with Violence: An Anthropology of Events and Everyday Life*. London-New York-New Delhi: Routledge.

Das V (1990) Our work to cry: your work to listen. In: V Das (ed.) *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 345–398.

De Neve G (2006) Economic liberalization, class restructuring and social space in provincial South India. In: G De Neve and H Donner (eds) *The Meaning of the Local: Politics of Place in Urban India*. London-New York: Routledge, pp. 21–43.

De Neve G and Donner H, eds (2006) *The Meaning of the Local: Politics of Place in Urban India*. London-New York: Routledge.

Doshi H (1974) *Traditional Neighbourhood in a Modern City*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.

Doshi H (1991) Traditional neighbourhood in modern Ahmedabad: the Pol. In: MSA Rao et al. (eds) *A Reader in Urban Sociology*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, pp. 179–208.

Fox RG (1991) Tezibazar: colonial town in prismatic society. In: MSA Rao et al. (eds) *A Reader in Urban Sociology*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, pp. 42–48.

Frøystad K (2006) Anonymous encounters: class categorisation and social distancing in public places. In: G De Neve and H Donner (eds) *The Meaning of the Local: Politics of Place in Urban India*. London-New York: Routledge, pp. 159–181.

Gough KE (1971) Caste in a Tanjore village. In: ER Leach (ed.) *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 11–60.

Jeffery P (1979) *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah*. London: Zed Press.

Jeffery R, Jeffery P and Jeffery C (2006) Parhai ka mahaul? An educational environment in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh. In: G De Neve and H Donner (eds) *The Meaning of the Local: Politics of Place in Urban India*. London-New York: Routledge, pp. 116–140.

Khan S (2007) Negotiating the Mohalla: exclusion, identity and Muslim women in Mumbai, *Economic and Political Weekly* 42(17): 1527–1533.

Massey D (1994) *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McDowell L (1999) *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Mukhopadhyay S (2007) Gender disparity in Kerala: some visual images. In: S Mukhopadhyay (ed.) *The Enigma of the Kerala Woman: A Failed Promise of Literacy*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, pp. 175–184.

Pardo I (1996) *Managing Existence in Naples: Morality, Action and Structure*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press.

Park RE and Burgess, EW (1921) *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Patel S and Deb K, eds (2006) *Urban Studies*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192117740042 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Phadke S (2007) Dangerous liaisons: women and men: risk and reputation in Mumbai, *Economic & Political Weekly* 42(17): 1510–1518.

Ranade S (2007) The way she moves: mapping the everyday production of gender and space, *Economic and Political Weekly* 42(17): 1519–1526.

Rao MSA et al., eds (1991) *A Reader in Urban Sociology*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Schwirian KP (1983) Models of neighbourhood change, *Annual Review of Sociology* 9: 83–102.

Sharma U (1978) Women and their affines: the veil as a symbol of separation, *Man* 13(2): 218–233.

Simpson E (2006) The rituals of rehabilitation: rebuilding an urban neighbourhood after the Gujarat Earthquake of 2001. In: G De Neve and H Donner (eds) *The Meaning of the Local: Politics of Place in Urban India*. London-New York: Routledge, pp. 206–231.

Srivastav S (2015) *Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Vatuk S (1972) *Kinship and Urbanisation: White Collar Migrants in North India*. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press.

Vatuk S (1982) Purdah revisited: a comparison of Hindu and Muslim interpretations of the cultural meaning of Purdah in South Asia. In: H Papanak and G Minault (eds) *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*. New Delhi: Chanakya, pp. 54–78.

Whyte WF (1955) *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* [1943]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wirth L (1938) Urbanism as a way of life, *American Journal of Sociology* 44(1): 1–24.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192117740042 Published online by Cambridge University Press