Understanding ethnic identities in urban spaces in India

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Abstract

The ethnic identity of an individual is a chief characteristic in determining her or his belongingness to parts of urban space in a society. Various studies show how Indians have internalised this identity for themselves as well as for others, and have experienced some sort of discrimination and/or advantage based on their ethnic group and identity; in explicit forms like document verification and obtaining a visa, or in much more implicit forms like rented accommodation or in entrance to gated communities. Moreover, this identity for some people further pushes them into what is known as a 'ghetto condition', coming out of which is an immense task not only due to economic reasons, but due to the culmination of social and cultural reasons piled up on the economic factor. The concept of ghettos, which is primarily theorised with reference to European and American societies, is also widely prevalent in India. What makes the current discourse even more interesting is that living in ghettos in India is not restricted to the lower castes only. Such urban spaces which are basically formed as a result of unequal attitude of the larger society also cater to religious and regional minorities as well.

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The concept of ethnic identity in an urban space and the formation of ghettos are intrinsically linked. Studies in the West have shown the relationship between the ethnic ghetto and ethnicity, using instances of Black Ghettos or Chinatowns in USA.[1] Such studies have emphasised the role of external forces such as anti-immigrant laws, governmental action, and racial politics in producing these areas as spaces of 'otherness'. A fundamental concern in this paper has been to contextualise the aforementioned in the Indian space. The paper is divided into three sections, each dealing with one of the phenomena mentioned above. The first section deals with the formation of an ethnic identity and its importance; the second with the idea of space and its different theoretical considerations as well the concept of urban space; and the last section deals with the factors and processes that lead to formation and existence of ghettos in an urban space.

Ethnic Identity

The word 'ethnic' comes from the Greek word *ethnos* which refers to people, tribe or a nation. Thus, ethnic identity and ethnicity, according to Gordon (1964), refers to 'a sense of peoplehood.' An ethnic group specifically means a collectivity of people as demarcate from other collectivities. Thus, by this definition, a group of people who share a sense of belonging to each other comprise an ethnic group. It is imperative to understand how an ethnic group is different from cultural groups, or religious and regional groups. As also, it is imperative to understand how an ethnic group is materialised and boundaries formed, and how these said boundaries are maintained.

The most important part to an ethnic group is the nomenclature. A set of characteristics are accepted as features of that ethnic group and every member is supposed to adhere to them. This adherence determines and regulates the flow of personnel across groups. This means discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of an individual's life. Further, there is social interaction between people of different ethnic groups. This interaction does not lead to cultural change in the ethnic group. (Barth 1969) Thus, cultural differences remain despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence.

Ethnic groups are essentially categories of ascription. They are largely biologically self-perpetuating, share fundamental cultural values, make up a field of communication and interaction, and have 'a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.' (Barth 1969: 10-11) For its existence, an ethnic group requires to project itself as a 'significant unit'. Thus, this necessitates a strong identification of members with the group, as well as marked differences with the non-members, or 'the others'.

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[1]Although many studies can be cited here, Marcuse's work "The Enclave, The Citadel, The Ghetto" (1997) would be a good start for the same.

While temporal and spatial factors can lead to change in culture and/or attitudes of the people, the ethnic group remains the same. An ethnic group basically entails a group of people who have similar reaction and consequences to any societal event. So, ethnic groups cannot be explained in exclusively cultural terms. They are situation-specific, and may or may not change with changing circumstances. The following are necessary to ensure the formation of an ethnic group:

1. Accentuation of 'we' feeling among members
2. The process of 'Othering' of all non-members
3. Presence of characteristics shared by all members
4. Building up of symbols to maintain the formed group (Jain 2012).

Boundary is not only limited to cultural characteristics, but also includes social and territorial counterparts. An ethnic group maintains its identity in the interaction of its members with non-members. (Barth 1969) Thus, it is needed to be classified the membership and exclusion boundaries. Along with membership and exclusion for people to belong to an ethnic group, the interaction with non-members is always structured. Hence, there are certain structural ways in which members and non-members interact.

Urban Space

Space, as a sociological concept, signifies the role of social practices, institutional forces and material complexity in the interaction between humans and spaces. In clearer terms, Michel Foucault (1991) defines as '..the space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space... we live inside a set of relations.' This space forms for an important enquiry in social sciences as here.... 'everything comes together... subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history' (Soja 1996).

Urban is generally seen as a place where the discrimination and injustice of the traditional society can be avoided. Migration, according to this, from rural to urban is primarily also the equivalent of upward mobility and results in a better standard of living. Urban is also associated with modernity and development. Scientific advancement is one of the main attributes of an urban society. Thomas Kuhn (1962) says that normal science is the investigation of all facets of a particular paradigm. A paradigm here refers to a set of concepts, categories, relationships and methods which are generally accepted throughout a community at a given point in time. However, due to such investigation, some anomalies always come up. These can exist till they are insignificant and have no practical implications. Thus, here the words 'insignificant' and 'practical' are

problematic as significance and practicality for whom comes into question. The way something is decided as being of significance and as having practical value is determined by a certain section of the society. This basically means that natural/normal science gets their drive from the 'middle class.' The aforementioned is the broadest critique of Kuhn. He provides an idealist interpretation of scientific advancement. On the other hand, Bernal is more practical in his theorisation and gives a materialistic basis of scientific advancement. He argues that material activity involves the manipulation of nature in the interests of man, and takes away the aspect of nobility and surreality from science which it had achieved through time (Harvey 1973).

Nonetheless, the Marxist interpretation of the urban remains one of the most significant. This basically entails the view that as more and more urbanisation takes place, more and more workers will be exploited in its name. 'There is a continuous polarisation between classes when in the profit-seeking process rich people, i.e. owners of the means of production, get richer, and poor people i.e. the working class, which sells its labour in the name of survival, remains poor and dominated by the ruling owner class' (Jauhiainen 2006: 181). Ultimately, the difference between the two classes of bourgeois and proletariat will rise, leading to the polarisation of society. This will further lead to pauperisation of the proletariat class as a result of deprivation and poverty. Due to capitalist industrialisation, 'working conditions deteriorated in the factories, workers became alienated from their workplace, inequality widened, housing standards in ghettos became utterly inhuman, community spirit declined, and class antagonism between workers and employers sharpened' (George 2010: 201). Such bad living conditions with bad hygiene and decline in feeling of welfare, have become the primary features of ghettos.

Peter Marcuse (1997) looks into urban space and comes with three kinds of urban spaces that are formed due to influx and outflux of migration that are important to be studied. He calls them the enclave, the citadel and the ghetto. An Enclave is a voluntarily developed spatial concentration of a group for purposes of promoting the welfare of its members. A Citadel is created by a dominant group to protect/enhance its superior position. Lastly, a ghetto is an involuntary spatial segregation of a group that stands in a subordinate political and social relationship to its surrounding society. It is imperative to understand here that ghettos and enclaves have always existed and are not exclusively an urban phenomenon. The presence of 'dalit bastis' in most villages of India can be seen as an example. Also, no ghetto or enclave is 'pure'. Every urban space in real existence functions like a mix of all the aforementioned types.

While enclaves and ghettos are both composed of people living separately from the larger society, there is a fundamental difference between the two. Enclaves comprise of people who want to live with their ethnic peers so as to preserve their values and traditions. However, ghettos are a result of forced exclusion from the general society that lead to people of a certain section living together in

compulsion. Enclaves can be of the immigrants, meaning people of a same immigrant community live together aspiring for upward mobility and integration in the larger society; or cultural, that is people congregate because they wish to be together and generally to preserve and strengthen the separate characteristics that underlie their sense of identity.

Marcuse (1997) further states that there are four underlying interlinked processes that more-or-less determine the existence of these distinct urban spaces. These can be listed as follows:

i. Technological change
ii. Internationalisation
iii. Concentration of ownership
iv. Privatisation of public sphere

Ghetto Formation

A ghetto basically entails that living community that is ghettoised, which is defined by some characteristic ascertained by the outside world and not a matter of choice by those thus separated out. Here, the concept of minority becomes relevant.

Nation-state, owing to the Eurocentric origin of the term, refers to a homogeneous monolithic entity comprising of a particular group of people. Thus, the minority groups get 'othered'. A minority is not based on numerical representation, but rather on the existing power relations in society. A population is a minority if it occupies some form of subordinate power position in relation to another population in that society (Ogbu 1998). While enclaves and ghettos both consist of minorities, with respect to the above definition, those in enclaves are basically minorities by choice, while those in ghettos are by force. This difference translates into huge variation in the social and economic living in actual practice.

A ghetto is a spatially concentrated area used to separate and to limit a particular involuntarily defined population group (usually by race) held to be, and treated as, inferior by the dominant society. A ghetto can be completely understood only if it is viewed as a socio-psychological, as well as an ecological phenomenon; for it is not merely a physical fact, but also a state of mind. Poverty, ethnic attachment, enforced segregation are the main determining characteristics of a ghetto. 'There is considerable psychological safety in the "ghetto": there one lives among one's own and does not risk rejection among strangers' (Marcuse 1997).

The above definition refers to that of a classic ghetto, something that does not exist in today's times. What we have today can be referred to as an outcast ghetto. It comprises of those people who are excluded from the mainstream economy by the forces of macro-economic developments. An outcast ghetto is different from a historic or classic ghetto in that while a classic ghetto has that

population which is subordinated and restricted; an outcast ghetto comprises of the excluded and castaway. An example of an outcast ghetto is the black ghetto, where people of colour reside (especially in the USA). This is of the excluded. It reflects a new process of exclusion of a portion of the population from the mainstream society.

The Indian Situation

The idea of ethnic identity plays a very important role in our everyday lives. Every casual discussion based on this topic reveals that every citizen has by themselves experienced some sort of discrimination and/or advantage based on their ethnic group and identity; in explicit forms like document verification and obtaining a visa, or in much more implicit forms like rented accommodation or in entrance in gated communities.

The above theorisation though done primarily in America and Europe is very relevant in the Indian context as well. The concept of ghettos, enclaves and citadels also exist in India. The equating of racism with casteism has always been of interest to scholars and thus, a feature directly related to this phenomenon obviously finds its existence in India with the prevalence of Dalit ghettos. What makes the current discourse even more interesting is that living in ghettos in India is not restricted to the lower castes only. Such urban spaces which are basically formed as a result of unequal attitude of the larger society also cater to religious and regional minorities at least. To understand the said statement better, we take the example of Muslim ghettos, one in Mumbai and one in Ahmedabad, and a regional ghetto, that of Tibetan refugees in New Delhi.

Mumbra, Mumbai

Mumbai has always been seen as the maximum city, a place where 'skyscrapers and slum-dwellings exist simultaneously' (Shaban 2008). However, in some senses, it is not very different from any other place. This is especially true in the post-neo-liberalism phase of the 1990s. Neo-liberalism and neoliberal policies have deeply entrenched the existing social relations by accentuating the amplifying of caste, gender, religious, regional and similar divides. Social conflicts are emerging as the process of 'othering' has increased. The dynamics of (urban) capitalism, ethnic segregation, and manufacturing of phobias are complex process that transcend neighbourhood, and also critically shape the pattern of crime, much visible on cityscapes.

Crime is a social construct. The attitudes of people get shaped by a number of external factors and are further accentuated by governmental laws and policies, and their selective implementation. For example, thousands of citizens living in slums of Bandra and Jogeshwari, were rounded off by the police after bomb blasts in local trains in the city on July 11, 2006 on the suspicion that some of them had participated in the act. The suspicion was based on no other ground except that these slums largely housed Muslim populations. Such biased behaviours can be more starkly seen in the case of Mumbra.

It is a town situated around 40 km away from Mumbai and is a part of Thane district. It is one of the ghettos formed in the aftermath of communal riots, primarily the 1992-93 Mumbai bomb blasts. The population (Muslim) of the area increased immensely in the aftermath. Due to its demographic composition, it is seen as a hub of anti-social activities, which makes it difficult for the residents to avail private opportunities like loans, credits and even services. Also, as people settled here are primarily those who were uprooted from their earlier residence, their economic and social well-being is comparatively poor. Moreover, Mumbra has a unique surroundings with the Parsik hills running along the east and a vast expanse of the Thane creek on the west. Such topography makes it difficult to execute programmes by the government as sometimes this requires additional expenditure and locality specific planning.

In such circumstances, the population there has gradually given up on the larger society and has found alternative methods of existence. They have opened low budget schools for their children and clinics, as leaving the area even for such basic necessities were difficult for them. Now, although they have been able to improve their situation, the struggle faced in the initial stages is neither completely over, nor forgotten by the residents.

Juhapura, Ahmedabad

The violent events of 2002 in Gujarat constitute one of the most violent attacks against Indian Muslims in the country, whether in terms of the number of victims or of the modalities of murder. It caused two thousand deaths, a thousand of which took place only in Ahmedabad, and 150000 internally displaced persons. Official estimates put the overall death toll at a little over 1000. Before 2002, Juhapura was a simple Muslim neighbourhood which was economically disadvantaged and had approximately 50000 inhabitants. However, post-2002 saw a mass influx of Muslims seeking an ethnic space, where they could feel protected. This is particularly true for the Muslim upper-classes, which, for the first time, were also victims of violence. Their arrival transformed the locality into a ghetto.

The physical geography of the place further marginalises Juhapura. To the east, it is surrounded by an extremely busy junction, and is separated from neighbouring Hindu dwellings with barbed wires and ditches. To the north, the ghetto is encased by buildings built to house the city's police and public servants. To the south, water treatment facilities ensnare the ghetto as well as pollute the soil and bring a plethora of diseases since they have been built at non-regulatory distances from the habitats. To the west, Juhapura opens on a four-lane road axis that crosses it leading to the Saurashtra region. In 2015, it was home to an estimated 500000 inhabitants. The tangible living conditions of Juhapura's inhabitants, and their difficulty in accessing an effective form of citizenship, has led them to consider themselves as 'second-class citizens.' In Juhapura, their ethnicity/religion disqualifies them from an effective form of

citizenship. Dust and water-leading to Juhapura invites cough and other digestive illnesses.

Forced resettlement, confinement, consubstantial identity stigma, and the duplication of institutions by private actors have taken place in the absence of public provision. The children, especially girls, who earlier studied in public and convent schools along with their Hindu and Christian counterparts, after relocating to the locality, had to shift to *madrasahs* or other budget private schools run by Muslim NGOs. The moral conception of *Adab*, as a way of knowing and doing, an art of living in the world that traverses the line between this-world and the other-world without being subsumed by either is an important aspect of the education. Both teachers and students narratives highlight respect, tinted with gender connotations of *Tehzeeb*, *Lihaaz* and *Izzat* (Matthan et. al. 2014). The school studied prides itself on fostering an 'Islami atmosphere'. *Adab* in the school encapsulated efforts at sheltering this community in a region hostile to them and also aim at inculcating values relevant to participating in a nation state.

Majnu ka Tilla (A Tibetan Refugee Camp), New Delhi

The concept of Tibetan Refugee came into being in 1949 with the Chinese domination into the region. This was followed by a mass exodus of Tibetan refugees to India. Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India, granted asylum and rehabilitated them in Refugee Camps in various parts of the country. However, a number of these refugees settled in New Aruna Nagar in New Delhi, now popularly called as 'Majnu ka Tilla'. This Tibetan colony developed on the banks of river Yamuna, North of Delhi covering an area of about 64627.42 sq. mts. The colony is divided into 12 blocks comprising of about 350 permanent houses along with many tenants and outstation students. An elected governing body of seven members is directly elected by the people for a term of three years. Central Tibetan Administration has a permanent representative known as the Settlement Officer.

Presently, the area has become famous for eateries and other clothing outlets, catering especially to nearby Delhi University student community. These outlets are run by the families living there and provide an 'authentic Tibetan experience'. For the people living there, Tibetan cuisine and culture has become their lifestyle as well as source of livelihood. They use subtle symbolic gestures to maintain their Tibetan identity, in terms of naming their places like *Little Lhasa,* or putting Tibetan flags outside their shops, as also selling small Yak soft toys and Tibetan delicacies.

In contrast to the aforementioned examples, the residents here appreciate the steps ensured by the Indian Government in enhancing their lives. There is also an underlying belief that their present situation is better than what they can expect under Chinese domination in their native land. The community, under the representation by governing body, wants to pay commercial tax, along with

house tax, as payback to the Indian government for doing all it has done till now and continues to do so.

Conclusively, the paper shows how the conceptualisation of an ethnic identity is both integral as well as influential in the society. This identity of an individual is a chief characteristic in determining her or his belongingness to parts of urban space in society. While on the one hand, the ethnic identity helps people in finding their group members in a heterogeneous society; on the other hand, it pushes some people into a ghetto condition. There are different kinds of ghettos and varied reasons leading to their formation, however, the underlying attitude of 'othering' by non-members and accentuation of 'we-feeling' within the members remain pertinent in all the cases. Moreover, coming out of such a ghetto condition is an immense task not only due to economic reasons, but due to the culmination of social and cultural reasons piled up on the economic factor. Lastly, this trend has neither temporal nor spatial limitations and thus, makes for an important part to understand the identity and living of the citizenry of a place.

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