

Mobility as Cultural Negotiation: Women's Experiences of Education, Work, and Social Life in Fringe Villages of Lucknow

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author seeks to explore the experiences of women in the village of Nandana, located in the peri-urban fringe village of Bakshi Ka Talab in Lucknow, as they navigate the deeply ingrained culture to access education, work, and social life. The author used structured interviews with respondents and in-depth case studies to gather information for the paper. The findings of the research revealed that the women's experience with mobility is not just about the physical act but is also about the process of cultural negotiation, which is carried out within the patriarchal setup. The research also found that the women's experience with mobility is still regulated but the women are able to use various strategies to incrementally expand the scope of mobility.

Keywords: Women's mobility, Cultural negotiation, Peri-urban fringe, Women's gender role, Women's patriarchal bargain, Intersectionality.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the marginal settlements of Lucknow, the question of where a woman goes, and under what circumstances, is rarely a straightforward geographical issue. The village of Nandana, situated in the Bakshi Ka Talab block on the periphery of Lucknow, is a microcosm of a situation in which traditional social norms are in a state of tension with the intruding forces of urbanization. Roads, mobile connectivity, coaching centers, and private educational institutions have already penetrated this interstitial zone, yet women's mobility in public space remains subject to a complex and unwritten cultural code in which issues of family honour, gendered respectability, and community observation are integral.

This paper is predicated on the notion, well-supported in feminist geographical studies, that "space is inherently gendered" (Massey, 1994). Thus, women's mobility cannot be understood merely in terms of the availability of transport facilities or physical distances; they are mediated at every turn by cultural factors, kinship relations, and respectability politics. However, at the same time, this paper also seeks to avoid a simplistic notion of women as victims of immobility. Thus, the women of Nandana emerge as active negotiators of family, cultural, and self-ascriptive factors, and it is on an understanding of such a complex and

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intelligent process of negotiation that this study hopes to shed some light.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The study seeks to achieve two things:

1. To explore how cultural practices such as purdah, family honor, and community surveillance impact women's educational, work, and social lives.
2. To explore how women negotiate such cultural constraints to achieve greater autonomy in a changing rural-urban context.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study seeks to draw on four different theoretical frameworks. The first, that of Doreen Massey's "Gender and Space," posits that "space is not a given, a backdrop to action, but is actively produced through relations of power, particularly those of a domestic/public kind, of femininity and confinement, and of the surveillance of women's presence in public space."

Naila Kabeer's (1999) feminist political economy approach provides a framework for analysis of the process of women's negotiation in the context of structural constraints. Instead of perceiving women either as being constrained or having choice, Kabeer's framework focuses on the structured nature of agency in the context of the availability of resources and the rules of the game of the institutions in which women are situated.

The concept of the patriarchal bargain developed by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) is relevant to the analysis of the process of women's compliance and acceptance of some of the restrictions in return for the protection and permissive nature of the patriarchal household.

Sheller and Urry's (2006) new mobilities paradigm provides a new approach to the analysis of the process of movement by perceiving it as a social practice embedded in relationships of power and culture. The new mobilities paradigm also highlights the relational nature of mobilities and insists that mobilities are always relational such that the freedom of movement of one person is predicated on the immobility of another person.

Finally, Crenshaw's (1989) framework of intersectionality and Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory provide a framework for analysis of the process of how different variables such as caste, class, religion, and marital status intersect with gender and lead to different experiences of mobility for different women and also how social capital acts simultaneously as a resource and a tool of control over the movement of women.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design of the study is descriptive and relies on a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study area of the research is Nandana village in Bakshi Ka Talab block of Lucknow district. The area is a transitional rural-urban area with a diverse caste profile and a wide range of income and occupation levels.

Eighty respondents were selected for the study by purposive sampling from three different categories of women: students (young women in formal education), homemakers (women involved in unpaid work), and working women (women in paid or self-employment). Ten in-depth case studies were conducted among women representing maximum variation in age, caste, income levels, and educational qualifications. Data collection for the quantitative study involved structured interview schedules for collecting information on socio-demographic variables, patterns of mobility, decision-making roles, and perceptions of social change. Data collection for the qualitative, case studies involved in-depth semi-structured interviews. The data collected for the quantitative study was analyzed by using descriptive statistics. The data collected for the qualitative case studies involved in-depth semi-structured interviews.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

a) Education-Related Mobility: Conditional but Cumulative

The most culturally endorsed form of women's mobility outside the home in Nandana village revolves around education. While there was a consensus among families about the education of girls up to secondary school, it was considered socially progressive and an important aspect of marriage ability. Yet, there was a conditionality to this endorsement : only to approved educational institutions, in groups, and not interfering with domestic routines.

The following quote, which many women in the sample community offered, encapsulates the conditionality of women's mobility in the context of education:

"Padhai ke liye to jaana hai, lekin roz aana-jaana theek nahi lagta."

("Going for studies is necessary, but daily travel back and forth does not feel right.")

This quote encapsulates the legitimizing role of education in the context of women's mobility. It offers a justification for women to move out of the home, which education alone can provide, yet reinforces the idea that women's mobility must be justified.

The educational mobility of women, according to Massey (1994), can only be understood in relation to men, women, or families. Women's educational mobility, in other words, can only be autonomous to an extent. While women were able to travel in groups or with male escorts, unsupervised educational mobility created anxiety among families and attracted social censure.

While women's educational mobility was conditioned, it was, however, cumulative in nature. Women who were successful in their struggle to have the right to go out for educational purposes were able to build family confidence and trust, and even develop confidence in public spaces.

While education can be considered cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), it can also be understood as a spatial recalibration, albeit in a slow manner, of the norms and boundaries of women's mobility.

b) Work-Related Mobility: Patriarchal Bargains and the Moral Geography of Labour

The prevalence of paid work outside the home was not only lower, at around eighteen to twenty-two percent, but also more culturally contested than educational mobility. This is because the figure was far below the regional average, a reflection of the cultural constraints placed on women's work-related movements. This is in line with Kandiyoti's (1988) patriarchal bargain, where women accept cultural constraints on their work movements in return for the protection offered by the patriarchal system.

The culturally acceptable work was that which did not disrupt the spatial boundary of home/public spaces. This included work done at home, such as stitching, beauty treatments, and self-help groups. This was encapsulated in the following quote from a homemaker who took part in the survey:

"Ghar se silai kar lo, bahar jaane ki kya zarurat hai?"

("Do the stitching from home — what is the need to go outside?")

This quote not only reflects a woman's choice to work at home but also positions such work as a moral imperative. The women who took part in work that disrupted the spatial boundary, such as work that required them to move, managed to balance work and cultural constraints through time discipline, relational scaffolding, and narrative management. They managed to balance work and cultural constraints through time discipline, relational scaffolding, and narrative management.

For example, some women took their smartphones to stay in touch with their families at all times:

"Mobile pe poori tarah khabar deti hoon - ghar wale thoda chain mein rehte hain"

("I keep the family fully updated; they stay a bit at ease").

This not only allowed them to move freely but also reproduced the surveillant logic that made such movements conditional.

c) Social Mobility: Respectability, Surveillance, and Collective Movement

The most restricted and least discussed aspect is social mobility, which is movement for leisure, community, or social visiting. Women never expressed their desires for social mobility in clear words, as the dominant cultural code views women's unproductive presence in public spaces as a suspicious act, which poses a threat to family honour. The act of surveillance is omnipresent and multidirectional, carried out not only by male members of the family but also by female members, neighbours, and the kinship network:

"Ek ghar se niklo, toh poora mohalla dekh raha hai"

("If you step out, the whole neighbourhood is watching").

To counter this, women have adopted collective movement as their first mode of movement. Collective movement offers women social security, which individual movement cannot provide, as there is less risk of social disrepute and less chance of harassment in a group, which indicates social respectability:

"Group mein jaane se izzat bani rehti hai"

("Travelling in a group keeps one's dignity intact").

This is in line with Phadke et al.'s (2011) view that women's movement in public spaces is always mediated through their management of social visibility. Religious festivals, NGO activities, and health centre visits are treated as 'windows' of women's mobility, which are socially sanctioned, and women strategically plan their social interactions in these periods.

The smartphone has also become an important complement to physical social mobility. Social relationships are maintained via WhatsApp groups and video calls. The virtual space is also not different in this regard. The statement "Mobile se duniya ka pata chalta hai, par uspe bhi nazar rakhi jaati hai" ("Through the phone one learns about the world, but the phone too is watched") indicates that even in the virtual space, surveillance is present. Digital and physical space are two different forms of cultural negotiations.

d) Negotiation Strategies: Tactics, Alliances, and Incremental Expansion

In all three domains of mobility, a set of recognizable strategies of negotiation is followed by the women. Though these are not strategies of resistance, these are 'tactics' in the words of de Certeau (1984), which do not directly confront the dominant strategies but work around them. The most dominant form of negotiation is 'moral framing,' wherein the purpose of the intended mobility is couched in morally correct terms. Education is the most important of these and acts like a cultural password that opens doors otherwise shut for the women. Health visits are also important in this regard. The second form of negotiation is 'internal alliances,' wherein the women work out alliances among the members of the household. A progressive mother-in-law, a liberal brother, an educated husband – these are some of the internal alliances that are helpful in the decision-making process of the household. Temporal management is the third form of negotiation and is shared among the women of the community. Finally, 'trust-building' is also an important form of negotiation wherein the women demonstrate over a period of time that they are 'trustworthy' and thereby slowly expand the scope of permissible mobility.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This challenges the idea that being located in the vicinity of a major city can automatically translate into greater women's mobility. The visibility of women's freedom in the urban landscape may actually heighten the restrictions on women based on gender, as people react to the perceived threats to the status quo. This is in line with Dupont's (2004) argument that the metropolitan fringe zone can actually heighten control over women's movement even as physical movement is liberalized.

Three analytical conclusions can be drawn from this research. Firstly, women's mobility is mediated through a clear hierarchy of cultural legitimacy, with education most readily sanctioned, work more contested, and social mobility most restricted, although these boundaries are mediated in relation to household contexts, social status, and accumulated trust-building. Secondly, women's mobility is fundamentally collective in nature, with individual mobility embedded in peer networks, family affiliations, and collective

knowledge, which pool available social resources to overcome structural constraints. Finally, digital and physical mobility are parallel concepts, with smartphones providing women with enhanced information and social mobility, although this remains subject to the same surveillant logic as physical mobility.

The policy implications of this research are significant, with implications for women's mobility extending beyond investment in roads and transport infrastructure, although this is still important, to include culturally sensitive interventions in the social conditions under which mobility is made permissible, such as safe and frequent women-friendly public transport, educational timetables sensitive to temporal constraints, and development programs that engage with male family members as well as women.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

The limitations of this research include its focus on a single village, its cross-sectional nature, which cannot capture seasonal mobility variations, and its potential failure to engage with broader debates on women's mobility through its exclusive focus on mobility in a single village in northern India. Further research would benefit from a comparative analysis of multiple village contexts, a longitudinal analysis of mobility change, and potentially incorporating GPS-based mobility mapping with participant consent.

The mobility of women in the peri-urban fringe of Lucknow is not a straightforward or linear progression towards freedom, but a complex process mediated through a complex interplay of patriarchal power, respectability, and compliance, as well as aspiration, solidarity, and subtle agency. The women of Nandana village are going places, and how this is so, and at what cost, is both a scholarly and a moral obligation.

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