

Private Space in Public Transport: Locating Gender in the Delhi Metro

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Gender has not been fully integrated into the mainstream of either the infrastructure debate or the debate on transport services. This article attempts to locate gender in public transport through an ethnographic study of the Delhi Metro services. Delhi Metro has not only promised women comfortable travel but has also provided private space for them in public transport. Thus a distinct power dynamics has been created, which has reproduced or transformed the internalised meaning of public space for women.

A young girl wearing short pants and a t-shirt, lots of junk jewellery, carrying a big casual bag enters the metro station, gets herself frisked at the ladies security check, crosses another check with the use of a smart card (a plastic magnetic strip card used as a prepaid swipe card by frequent travellers of the metro services), waits at the “women only” side of the platform and enters the ladies coach of the Delhi Metro.

This is how most of the middle class women are experiencing public transport in Delhi. The metro train which has brought unprecedented comfort to public transport has further added to this comfort by introducing an exclusive ladies coach. The ladies coach has become a phenomenon in the Delhi Metro, promising a safer journey to its women passengers. Experiences of the space provided by the ladies coach in public transport remain unexplored.

Based on an ethnographic study, the aim of this article is to locate gender in the Delhi Metro and the kind of space it has provided to its women passengers. It is based on the participant observation on the Delhi Metro over one year during which the informal interviews were conducted with women passengers.

Public Transport and Gender

In policymaking the transport concerns are mainly about how transport infrastructure could be efficiently and cost-effectively constructed and maintained. Fernando and Porter's (2002) work on gender and transport, using a gender perspective to look at a range of transport issues in a variety of locations, maintains that gender has not been fully integrated into the mainstream of either the infrastructure debate or the debate on transport services. However this work mainly focuses

on rural areas and highlights that while transport professionals have taken little account of gender, the issues of access and mobility have also been marginalised in the discourse on gender and development (Fernando and Porter 2002). Some studies in this work (Iga 2002) suggest that the influence of culture should not be ignored in the usage of transport.

The cultural rules which are rarely unfavourable to men reinforce the unequal gender power in the transport as well. Men can usually travel as they wish, by whatever means available. However, women may be constrained by restrictions on where, how and with whom they travel (Iga 2002).

The experiences of urban women are remarkably different from that of their rural counterparts for the need of transport, as urban women mostly need to travel for work or education on a daily basis. Urban women travel long distances to reach offices or commercial areas and for that they have to depend on public transport. Woman's access to the economic, social and cultural life of a city has always been constrained as she could never circulate freely. In addition, “because a woman's spatial range is kept limited, she is often anxious about travelling alone to new place or unknown areas even in her own city. Thus the physical structure of a city reflects and reinforces inequalities of its social structure through not being equally accessible to both the genders” (Desai 2007).

Before the advent of Delhi Metro, public transport in Delhi relied primarily on the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) buses and private bus service which used to be called the Blue Line buses. The experiences of women in these buses comprised narratives of harassment by men, which occurred mostly silently and sometimes verbally. The only space for women in these buses was around six to eight reserved seats. However, the experiences of boarding and de-boarding the buses hijack the whole purpose of having reserved seats as women feel that they would not mind standing in the bus if the journey is harassment free.

There have been initiatives to address these issues. For example, DTC welcomed

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the partnership with a Delhi-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) Jagori for holding workshops to sensitise bus drivers and conductors on issues of gender and sexual harassment and to not tolerate harassment in their buses. The training programme was inaugurated by the chief minister, Sheila Dikshit on 3 September 2007 (Jagori 2007).

Some of the findings of a survey conducted by Jagori during these workshops show that if women commuters confront the harassers, support from co-passengers and bus staff is difficult to get. The seats reserved for women are often occupied by men who do not vacate them even when requested to do so. The harassers most often are not intimidated by the presence of bus drivers and conductors and they usually get away without much protest by the bus staff or the public. Women have also reported the presence of drunken men around bus stops after dark which gives them an acute sense of insecurity (Unifem 2011).

The understanding of gendered experiences in public transport in Delhi before the metro confirms that in the buses there is no sense of secure space, as women share the space with anonymous men. Hence travelling in the buses has always been reported as a struggle by women passengers. It curtailed their field of opportunity and dimmed their sense of secured travel in the city.

Here Comes the Metro

The Delhi Metro was inaugurated on 24 December 2002. The initial days of metro journey were reported safer than the bus travel by women. However, the increasing connectivity of the metro on different routes resulted in it getting overcrowded. Especially, after its connectivity to prime stations like Rajeev Chowk, Kashmiri Gate and NOIDA, special security personnel have to handle the crowd on the platforms and help maintain queues of the passengers for the convenience of those passengers who have to de-board the metro.

Women's experiences started getting closer to the earlier experiences of the bus journeys because of the increasing population in the metro train. In October 2010, Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) decided to reserve the first coach of the

train for women passengers in view of increasing number of passengers in general and women passengers in particular.

The ladies coach is the first coach of every train. Unlike the ladies coach of the Mumbai local trains, the coach does not have picture or figure of a woman outside the coach, neither does it have "ladies" inscribed on it. The ladies coach can be recognised by its placement on the platform because the platform has specific space where the ladies coach stops. "Women only" in pink colour is written on that part of the floor of the platform where the first coach/woman's coach is designated to stop. However, inside the coach some differences can be found which demarcate it from the rest of the train. These are marked by the advertisements about contraceptive pills or beauty products and sometimes awareness about health issues faced by women like breast cancer or cervical cancer. The ladies coach accommodates about 361 commuters (43 seating and 318 standing). However one can find more than 43 women sitting, as they do not mind sitting in congested way and the coach accommodates more women as they do not have to mind the body distance in the absence of men. In other instances of public transport women always have to be alert in public areas to protect their physical as well as visual boundaries. There is no barrier to separate the ladies coach from the rest of the train as the emergency exit is at the end of the ladies coach. However, the barrier is in the form of a penalty of Rs 250, which deters men from boarding it.

Gender and Delhi Metro

Gender exploration in public transport has been done in earlier studies (Phadke 2007), where women's presence and usage of public transport has been explored. Nevertheless, as far as the Delhi Metro is concerned, Sadana's (2010) work on it has explained women's better access to the city and their emancipation from the dependency on male family members for mobility in the city. Apart from the increasing number of women passengers in the Delhi Metro, there are quite a number of instances where gender can be located. It starts with the entry gate, where the security is divided along gender lines, with women security police, who frisk women

passengers entering the metro station. At the customer care and token selling counters the presence of women staff is quite evident, which brings women employees in a noticeable number, in the realms of the public transport for the first time in Delhi. The Delhi Metro employed three women drivers in 2002 and the number has increased to 25 in 2011 (*The Times of India* 2011). After this initiative DMRC decided to hire women conductors for the DMRC buses (Pandey 2010), which gradually would result into rendering a new face to the public transport in Delhi. Women guards are also employed on the metro's platforms to restrict men from boarding the ladies coach. This illustrates how these women guards, who come from lower middle class families, exercise authority in the public realm which they might not claim in the private realm of their homes. This reinforces one of the claims of gender and space discourse that people and social identities are determined by the physical or spatial environment (Desai 2005).

Private within Public

The ladies coach provides a private space for women. Apart from the safety aspect, women's physical interaction with men is almost absent during travel in the metro. Many women reported that they hire a cycle rickshaw to reach the metro station, get themselves frisked at the women's security check counter and most of them use the smart card to travel in the metro, so they do not need to even stand in the queue with men to buy the token. At the platform they have a separate space to stand while waiting for the train's arrival and which separates them from the male passengers even on the platform. In the initial days a lady guard used to stand on the platform to instruct men not to stand on the space which is reserved for the women.

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Many women reported that they do not mind the crowded platforms now as they have a separate space to stand. Even male passengers reported that when they travel with women family members on crowded routes they ask them to travel in the women's coach. Women travelling with men also prefer to travel in the ladies coach and on the platform stand at the space reserved for them.

Even in the night women feel safe in the ladies coach. The metro trains run from 6 am till about 11 pm. Many women who travel to faraway stations like NOIDA or Gurgaon (cities at the periphery of Delhi) have to travel by metro after dark as well. But these women reported that the ladies coach provides them a secure space to travel and a male family member picks them up at the metro station near their homes. Many women are found to be waiting for a male family member, outside the metro station (in the daytime). However, in the night hours, women prefer to wait at the "women only" section of the platform as they find this space safer than that outside the metro station. The "women only" section of the platform has been reported as a waiting point by many women. Sometimes, even in daytime, many women are found to be waiting there.

Inside the ladies coach, the observations reinforce the sense of space and freedom among women in many ways. A group of women is often found to be sitting on the floor of the train and chatting with each other. They feel less conscious in the ladies coach than in the other coaches with men. Women passengers reported that they can talk, sit, and laugh without being conscious of the male presence. The studies on women's access to public space attach the discourse of respectability with their presence in public space. In this discourse women moderate their behaviour in public to avoid being labelled as unspectable. This moderation involves tone, volume of voice along with body language. These body politics have been discussed in detail in the studies on social construction of gender (Dube 2001).

One important finding that came out during the study was about their agency in dressing. There are many young female students who travel by metro to the Delhi University wearing short pants and skirts.

Many of these students explained their limited agency earlier as far as their dressing was concerned (when they used to travel by bus). However, due to the ladies coach of the Delhi Metro the threat of physical proximity with men in the public transport is absent thus allowing them the freedom to wear clothes of their choice.

In the gender and space discourse, the public space is the site for exchanging ideas, values and a platform for leisure activities for men. However, for women, public spaces are often regarded as transit ways to other regions. A woman is supposed to use public spaces as a transit between one private space to another (Gardner 1990). Her negotiation of the public spaces is more likely to be governed by some markers stipulated for the woman like physical look, proper decorum, non-verbal communication, proper attire and so on (Paul 2001).

Women's claim to the freedom of body language and choice of clothes reflect how space and spatial considerations contribute in the constitution of femininity (Niranjana 2001). Many geography scholars maintain that it is important to understand that there is a difference between the metaphorical (or cultural) space and material space. This understanding particularly becomes imperative, if we consider how certain cultural ideas of space have an impact upon the bodily practices of women, conceptualising and embodying the socio-spatial matrix (Soja 1989). The understanding of bodily practices in the ladies coach of the metro emphasises the spatial perspective to women's experiences showing that spatiality itself participates in the production of gendered bodies. On a parallel note, Bourdieu's work also demonstrates how space enters into the very constitution of social life and identities (Bourdieu 1977). His concept of habitus reveals how a spatial classification is fundamental to one's social and cognitive map, providing individuals with a set of parameters within which to deal with everyday lives and situations. In Bourdieu's conceptual scheme, the habitus not only plays a major role in shaping and orienting our practical acts, but is also renewed along this course.

The new notion of expressivity in the public transport (provided by the ladies coach) also puts forth an understanding

of how the ladies coach has come up as a resource for "doing gender". Doing gender means constructing the differences between men and women and using them in actions and interactions to reinforce the essentialness of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). The creation of separate public washrooms in North America has been recognised as the earliest resource of doing gender (Goffman 1977). In the Indian context the ladies coach of Delhi Metro is the latest example of such resource. In the feminist studies of social construction of gender and doing gender, gender itself is constituted through interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987), which explain that in Indian society girls internalise the use of space and behaviour including posture, dress and speech. The freedom of conduct and clothing in the public space provided by the ladies coach reveals, first, how a private space is created for women in a public transport while transiting from one space to another, second, how gender is reproduced in a new environment, and third, how women conduct themselves to fit their own notion of expressivity.

Policing the Space Invaders

Apart from the sense of freedom and protection, the ladies coach also provides a sense of authority among women passengers. Many women confirmed that they feel a sense of belongingness with the ladies coach and protect the purpose of the same by not allowing men to travel in it. Many women protest and generally do not let the men enter. The DMRC has a special squad for the metro train for the same purpose. Women passengers claim that they sometimes inform the male passengers about the fine which they will have to pay if they travel in the ladies coach, which works to stop them from travelling in ladies coach. This, however, reveals that the ladies coach does not only provide a sense of private space to women but also accords an unprecedented authority to them in the public place to protest. Women explained that, while travelling by bus, it is difficult to protest in case of any assault as co-passengers who are mostly men do not support the woman victim. The protest in the bus becomes more of an embarrassment rather than being an effective means to redressal. Feminist scholars

and geographers have posited access to and control over space as key elements in power dynamics (Paul 2001). Power relations demarcate the boundaries of spaces and determine the legitimacy of users who enter these spaces as well as their identities, discourses and interests (Gaventa 2006).

The physical space is frequently utilised as strategy to reproduce self which, embody and sometimes naturalise such behavioural strategies with passage of time. It is through replication of such identities that specific spaces come to be associated with either masculine or feminine that strongly influence men's and women's actual behavior and power within them (Kilde 1999).

The experiences of women passengers in policing men in Delhi Metro brings forth an understanding about the gender relations in public space that the power equation of every space involves the question of majority. In the gender and space discourse, the subjugated position of women in public space has a lot to do with their minority status and where a space like ladies coach brings them together and provides them with a sense of majority which makes them feel empowered and renders them the capacity to protest vocally. Second, the space of metro train is a controlled space where it is difficult for the offender to run away unlike the bus journeys of earlier days, however, it may be added that with the inclusion of Tata buses of the Marcopolo make in the fleet of the DTC, the entry and exit in DTC buses have become relatively controlled. The doors of the metro train open only at the station and in between the two stations the security can be contacted to complaint against the offender. Hence, the space of ladies coach, providing a sense of majority to women and the special security attached with it (penalty of Rs 250 and special squad) facilitate an unusual kind of power relation in the public space.

This power relation can be understood by Bourdieu's work on symbolic power (Bourdieu 1989), where the space of the ladies coach can be analysed as a space of symbolic power. Symbolic power is the power, according to Bourdieu, "to conserve or to transform the current classification in matters of gender, nation, region, age and social status". It is used through words to describe individuals, groups or institutions. But to understand how women get this

symbolic power in the ladies coach, it is important to understand that symbolic power has to be based on symbolic capital. Bourdieu has recognised symbolic capital as a "credit", "which grants power to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in the position to impose recognition" (Bourdieu 1989). The separate ladies coach is a symbolic capital for women, which helps them to recognise themselves as a group and to look upon men in this public space as the other group. Within the space of their own group they exercise power to impose the recognition that has been provided to them.

Now we can understand that women's capacity to police men in the ladies coach comes through the symbolic power provided to them in the space of the ladies coach. To make them exercise their symbolic power they are given symbolic capital (in form of punishment and penalty to the invaders). Public space has always been a no-authority space for women and women were always expected to negotiate with the power relations, which are tilted towards men. However, the ladies coach of the Delhi Metro, representing symbolic power and symbolic capital to women, has brought a transformation of power relations in the public space. The space of the ladies coach as a part of public transport has provided certain amount of agency as well as power to women which has manifested in making their negotiation with the public space smoother.

Conclusions

Although there are continuous shifts and transformations in how public and private spaces are characterised, as the meanings they acquire are always contingent upon their contexts, the dichotomy of public/private space can get blurred when one space can become part of another. The ladies coach of Delhi Metro has provided a little private space to women in the vast public space. The meaning of a public space can be beyond its physical boundaries and there can be an emotional meaning of the space (i.e., space that is mentally inhabited) which create an attachment with the space inhibited. The ladies coach provides a private space in a public transport to women for the first time in Delhi. There is a visible transformation in their

conduct, decorum and even in physical looks including the attire, to fit their own notion of expressivity in this new space.

The space of the ladies coach also highlights a distinct power dynamics in public transport which is tilted in favour of women and reproduced or transformed the internalised meaning of public space for women.

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