

Sidewalk and Traffic Intersections: An Urban Anthropological Evaluation of the Spatial Organization and Practices of Dhaka City

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Abstract: The ever-increasing demography of world's one of the most densely populated cities of a so-called developing country and its inconsistent urban spatialization and urban practices have turned the urban geography of Dhaka into a chaotic one. Due to an irregular and oftentimes hegemonic "spatial practice" (borrowing Henri Lefebvre's term), spaces on the urban landscape of Dhaka are used, reused, misused, and not to mention, abused. In line with urban anthropology's critical concern, this paper takes up a two empirical case studies of spatial practices within Dhaka city's urban site - one is the informal spatial economy of hijras at the traffic signals while the other is the expansionist re-decoration of the front gate of the Headquarters of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) situated at Sat Masjid Road along Dhanmondi neighborhood - and investigates into the political, social, economic and cultural influences that shape the spatial practices and ensue spatial restructuring of our everyday urban life. In doing so, this paper also locates the issues of inhabited expansionism, social/urban justice and 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008) and casts a curious look at the transforming notion of citizenship rights and the role of the state/military policy in structuring city life. Adopting the methods of empirical data analysis and participation observation, this paper attempts a critical investigation of our urban geography, how it continuously reshapes our social relationships, and ensues new facets of urban struggle for existence, both spatial and economic. To put in simple terms, this research explores two central issues of urban anthropology in Bangladeshi (Dhaka) context: spatial practice of urban space and ensuing social relationships and encounters.

Keywords: space and power spatial practices, Henri Lefebvre, spatial justice, spatial economy

Introduction

Public space might logically be deemed as a spatial entity, which is not owned privately. Some scholars include in their account of public spaces those which are used by the general public even if they are privately owned. A good example in this regard might be the shopping mall or the Internet. The latter example indicates that public space is not always defined in purely physical terms but can include digital space as well. Generally speaking, we might think of public spaces those realms in which the general public claimed a stake in ownership, use, access, participation and regulation or some combination of the above. Jaffe and Koning contend that urban public space is a space of "freedom and anonymity where individuals can reinvent themselves, engage in new types of encounters and develop new forms of sociability" (2016, 55). However, they also account for the "ongoing struggles" for a convivial experience in public spaces (55). Increasingly, we have come to conceive of public space is that which is defined by state ownership such as the public park, the street, the sidewalk, the square, the subway or City/Town Hall. However, such public spaces, as Henri Lefebvre argues, have dynamic facets which oftentimes change its character based on how such spaces are used, demarcated, semiotically manifested. For instance, an urban place which once was a public park open to everyone might restrict the access to the third gender after a

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conservative authority takes up the power of the City Corporation thus rendering them outsider or infiltrators. This paper examines two case studies, one involving the spatial practice of the major traffic signals while the other is connected to the spatial restructuring through structural decorations at the main gate of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) Headquarters, both situated within the urban vicinity of Dhaka city. Sharing the disciplinary interest of Urban Anthropology and critical focus of spatial criticism, this study tends to read how spatial practices and spatial restructuring/reorganization produce novel social relationships thus rendering new identities and a dynamic cartography of the city. In doing so, this paper also locates the issues of inhabited expansionism, social/urban justice and 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008) and casts a curious look at the transforming notion of citizenship rights and the role of the state/military policy in structuring city life. Thus, casting a close look at how spatial restructuring repositions everyday practice and public motorway is repurposed for casual spatial economy. This paper finally attempts to understand the intervention of power into spatial practices and behaviour.

Study area and methodology

For this research, I had to observe use and repurposing of urban space as a small-scale local phenomenon. For the case study on the hijra presence, this study particularly uses Mirpur Road (Dhaka) and the second case study is specifically relating to the spatial restructuring of the main gate of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) situated in the vicinity of Dhanmondi Residential Area of Dhaka. This observation (for both case studies) spans over a period of one year from June 2018 till mid 2019. Being a resident of an adjacent neighbourhood, I have to use this passage as my frequent route to my quotidian movement. Hence, my access to these spaces has been facilitated due to my familiarity with this neighbourhood. Hence, as a middle-class inhabitant of this neighbourhood, the issue of cultural relativism has never been a contentious issue for me. My intervention with this place as a participant observer and my informal/casual interaction with the common pedestrian helped me to understand how both a) spatial restructuring affects everyday life, and b) public space is repurposed for informal economy.

For this empirical research, data gathered through close participant observation as city pedestrian along BGB area and as regular commuter through Mirpur road, the place from where I recorded my empirical data of the hijras' use of traffic intersections as a means of their space- (public road) and traffic-dependent informal economy. In case of BGB's decorative expansion of its territory, I closely observed the way how, due to such expansion, the pedestrians over the months have re-routed their movements from the sidewalks sometimes overlapping the public road. As for the hijras' repurposing of public road, I myself was a contributor in their economy, thus a participant, and also repeatedly observed the pattern of their informal economy and how their ritualistic money-collection has become everyday practice. In short, both these points of urban space have been the part of my daily trajectories across urban landscape. I myself being a sidewalker and commuter of the same space the experience and reconstruction of which has been studied for this research, I did not go for any interlocutor for my data collection. Therefore, in this research data has been collected through participant observation applying what Maréchal calls autoethnographic method (2010, 43).

Case Studies and analyses

1. *Transgender visibility at metropolitan traffic signals:*

A common everyday experience of private-car/ automobile passengers stuck at the traffic signals and jams in Dhaka is that they are approached by the hijras seeking alms (Fig. 1). Depending on the transgender concentration of Dhaka city area, such hijra presence at the



Fig. 1: Hijras begging alms at traffic intersections.

signals varies. Due to a general stigma and discomfort of the urban people (or even the collective population) towards the transgender community, hijras are economically and socially pushed towards the blur and insecure periphery of the society causing social and economic insecurity in them. Hence, such social and occupational ostracism delimits and thus specifies the transgender visibility in the city area. The metropolitan area becomes almost a 'no place for hijra' ensuring their minimal visibility. However, as a common source of income hijras beg for alms to those apparently well-off car or other automobile riders. The selection of cars and/or automobiles with low ground clearance as the potential financial source relies on two principal factors: the riders' economic class/ solvency and reachability of car/automobile passengers (i.e. low window position, individualized space). Such hijra presence at traffic signals evokes some common behavioral responses and movements among the car passengers which include: waving hands expressing inability to help, being busy with cell phone, pretending to take nap, pretending not to have seen them *etc.* Such spatial responses of urban population to hijra intervention underline the social segregation of the city. While asking for help, hijras engage in brief verbal exchange, smile/anger-exchange with the car/automobile riders. The few seconds'/minutes' interaction between the hijras and the automobile passengers contains much hope and sometimes frustration or anger among the hijras while frequently an escapist attitude among the passengers. Segregated by a heteronormative power structure, the traffic signals serve as their site for interaction, if not assimilation or integration.

Such urban space generates a kind of economy and becomes the site of a kind of space-specific earning, a kind of spatial economy which reiterates periodically as long as there is traffic on the road. However, a vacuum or scarcity of traffic due to any urban emergency such as lockdown during the Covid 19 pandemic or political unrest such as strike minimizes such spatial economy and pushes the hijras into invisibility and albeit, hunger and poverty. Hence, urban automobility (use of automobiles for transportation) is a pre-requisite for such producing such spatial economy. Traffic signals or traffic jams thus appear to be an opportunity for the hijras to generate such economy. Paradoxically, while urban automobility is one of the essentials for the hijras to earn their living,

immobility (traffic jam, long signals) of urban automobility is that helps them more to try their luck in collecting alms. Traffic signals thus become a means of production for the hijras and thus contribute to their urban survival. The utilization of urban space by the hijras thus produces capital as well as creates a site for their social interaction even if briefly. From the perspective of the car-riders, they see the marginalized or almost invisible hijras thus getting an idea about the heterogeneity of gender presence. Traffic signals thus become the site for hijra interactionism and create a novel conception about the reproduction of urban space. Such dialectic state of space is what Lefebvre calls *espace conçu* or conceived space, a notion which is informed by how we live a space (1991, 31). Lefebvre's Marxist assumption of space as social product has its resonance in the study of urban spatial practice. Lefebvre famously argues, "Every society and hence every mode of production produces a (social) space, its own space" (1991, 31). Such material conception of space denies spatial existence as a "preexisting void" or a "static construct", rather vouches for space as "dialectically interwoven matrix" (qtd in Wolfreys, 2015, 236-237) construing and reconstruing its utility and hence revising the representational facets of space. Since the hijras' livelihood is contested in most other places within the urban location, the traffic signal becomes a site for the representation of urban political economy. The hijra presence at the signals also signals at the uneven spatial arrangement or accommodation of the urban geography. Hijras' conditional sharing of their earning with the physically challenged alms-seeker puts them into a "circuit of capital" (Lefebvrian term) production and distribution. I call it an urban-street capital.

Different points of urban public space become (trans)-gendered space during the traffic signals and the urban economic and gender inequality becomes visible in these brief intervals. Such gendered feature of the urban social space hints at the crisis of transgender visibility across the urban landscape thus questioning the notion of public space as accessible to all urban dwellers. It seems that the re-appropriation of the stigmatizing urban slur "street girl" has become a means of survival.

2. BGB's protruding elephant statues: Goodbye, Pedestrians!



Fig. 2: Two of the five elephant statues occupying the footpath in front of BGB Headquarters

Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), the main border protecting paramilitary authority of Bangladesh, has recently placed five colossal plastered elephant statues at one of its front gates (Fig. 4, Gate no. 4). BGB Headquarters, a paramilitary establishment already situated in the heart of Dhaka metropolitan area, has pushed its geographical line farther onto the urban public space, the sidewalks. The structural and aesthetic expansion of a

military establishment into the urban vicinity raises the question of spatial justice, citizenship rights and above all, the 'right to city'. Moreover, such spatial practice redefines the limits of social relationship and creates new discourses of urban experiences of everyday life. As figures 2 and 4 illustrate, the decorative elephant statues facing onto the street occupy the pivotal footpath space reserved for the urban dwellers. Two things happen in this case- either the expansion of military space into civil/ urban territory or civil space yields to military space. Such expansion in the form of occupation denies/reduces the right of the citizens to utilize the urban space for their movement and forces the city-dwellers, pedestrians to be invaders of the urban street as they are now forced to walk on the street. The sign post in the middle of the footpath which is now occupied by the BGB administration symbolically establishes an inviolable prohibition saying "□□□□□□ □□□□" ("Parking Not Allowed") and the sign-post stays right in the middle of the footpath blocking the smooth movement of the passer-by. Such occupation functions as a display of unequal hegemonic power relationship between the military and non-military population and oftentimes are justified in pretext of public safety. The imperial symbol of elephant as the material occupier of the space adds to the hegemony. An intervention into cityscape by military establishment is termed as military urbanism referring to a spatial negotiation between the metropolitan/urban authority and



Fig. 3: Protruding elephant statue occupying sidewalk

the Military administration. Building of fortified gates, barracks, cantonments and other components of military operation in the heat of urban landscape leads to the militarization of cityscape. Such militarization bears the sensitive justificatory arguments of nationalism, sovereignty, and collective good and so on, the questioning of which might lead the individuals to encounter disciplinary and policing regulations.

Elephant plays an important role in the Indian Sub Continental imperial history. India was the first nation to start and the last nation to stop the use of elephants in imperial warfare starting from the 15th century B.C. A king's wealth was measured by the number of elephants he had. Wars were often fought over territories which have a great deal of elephants thus making elephants a war motif. Chanakya's account states that the Indian emperor Chandragupta Mourya had more than 21000 elephants. We also hear of war elephants which were heavily armored and were used as tanks. Warriors used to mount on the elephants in a chariot-like structure placed on its back. A very common use of elephants was placing them as mobile fortresses while the rest of the soldiers used to rally around. The monarchical history of Dhaka from the 16th century till the arrival of the British bears witness to the emergence of Dhaka as the economic and political centre. Mir

Jumla, the renowned subahdar of Bengal under Emperor Aurangzeb, has decided to turn Dhaka as his administrative epicenter (Islam, Miah, Khanam & Ahmed, 2012). From that period on, Dhaka has encountered modifications in its urban geography to the presence of the royal families. Places like Pilkhana (Elephant Stable), Elephant Road, Hatirpool (Elephant Pool), *Hatipota* (near Buriganga) and Hatirjeel (Elephant Lake) bear the legacy connected to the grooming and taming of elephants for different royal and military purposes.



Fig. 4: BGB Gate no. 4

However, all these legacies date back to the pre-British period, i.e. mainly during the Mughal regime. Even during the Mughals, the elephants used for military purposes and/or as status symbol do not have any indigenous connection with the geography of Dhaka, most of those elephants were imported from Assam (now part of India). Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) was previously known as BDR (Bangladesh Rifles) till 2011 and used to be known as East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) during the Pakistan period from 1947. During this period of almost 75 years assuming three different names (Islam *et al.*, 2012), BGB as a paramilitary force has never used elephants as a part of their operations; nor their badge/ logo does not bear any sign of elephant or whatsoever. Just because the place where their Headquarters are situated (Pilkhana, Dhaka) has once been used as the resting, nurturing, grooming place for the elephants of the rich landlords of the Mughal period (Mamoon, 1993, 154), does not substantially justify of five protruding elephant statues at the BGB gate occupying public space. Hence, even though elephants might carry some legacy with the Mughal history of Dhaka, it has no paramilitary connection with Border Guard Bangladesh, a powerful and responsible entity for a protection of our national borders. Following this brief account, we cannot really attach any semiotic significance of the elephant symbols in the form of aggressive statues occupying public space and forcefully rerouting urban mobility.



Fig. 5: Original master plan BGB Headquarters gate

The placement of a paramilitary establishment in the heart of a civil residential and shopping area itself represents an act of militarization of urban space. During occupational war, as we all know, militaries are instructed to avoid the civil localities whereas the deliberate positioning of BGB headquarters may invite collateral damage as we have seen a few bystander civilians dying during the BDR mutiny of 2009. Such casualty is obvious and can be avoided by re-spacing or re-positioning the military establishments. Military or paramilitary establishments have some essential yet confidential components by its own rights. Hence, urban intersectionality of military entity might put things in jeopardy and impose undue restrictions on civil life. Moreover, militarization of urban space has its own intra-colonial trope embedding surveillance, control, restrictions, and/or punishments upon urban life.

The master plan of the BGB Pilkhana gate also has a faulty adjustment where the surface extension of the gate reaches the main road deleting any space for footpath for the bystanders. And, the addition of the elephant statues farther completes the annihilation of public footpath. Such spatial violence and urban maladjustment lead to urban discomfort, violation of citizen rights, and sometimes lessening of military credentials. Oftentimes, such discomfort of civil population leads to fear. Elephant statues protruding from the fortified gate of a paramilitary establishment pose a symbolic threat to the pedestrians which hints at the imperial interests of the state. They become more frightening than the real elephants striding along the urban street of Dhaka collecting tip with the help of their mahouts. The military spatial expansion causes civil spatial contraction (redaction of public space) and thus evokes the question of social justice. The passage from civil space to a designated military space occurs as a result of occupation and such expansion re-demarcates the urban cityscape, redefines the freedom of movement, and actualizes the civil-military relationship. By actualization of civil-military relationship, I mean the production or modification of social relation in accordance to the use of the space, the spatial practice as Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) calls it. Henri Lefebvre puts forward his arguments about the dialectic and social status of space in his seminal book *The Production of Space* (1991, originally published in 1974). Lefebvre points out “that (social) space is a (social) product” (1991, 30) referring to the dynamic characteristic of a space which is continuously being used and repurposed thus creating different sets of

social relationships at different moments. Thus, the once law-abiding pedestrians walking on the footpath become the enforced jaywalkers on the main street; or if the same pedestrians walk along the footpath adjacent to BGB gate, they are detected by the policing CCTV and are now termed as illegal infiltrators. Thus, the military expansionism redesigns the urban space and therefore, produces new social relations.

The front gate of the Bangladesh Border Guard's Headquarters occupying the footpath thus forcing the pedestrians to walk on the street thus risking their lives and forcibly destabilizing the urban commuting. The aggressive image of the gate with five elephants coming out has its symbolic connotation. Elephants are historically and mythologically commonly deemed as the symbol of power and wisdom, two metaphors significant for domination. Lefebvre, referring to the real estate investors' spatial occupation, understood such occupation as "the dynamics of the settlement space" (qtd in Gottdiener & Hutchinson, 2011, 81), a space by creating or placing object/ establishments. With reference to Lefebvre, Hutchinson and Gottdiener point out, "Government places fire stations and police departments in separate locations across the metropolis in order to respond to distress relatively quickly. The state controls a large amount of land and utilizes it in its administration of government" (2011, 81). BGB as an auxiliary force of Bangladesh Army under government's Ministry of Defence has a similar military function in the country to secure the borders and to aid Bangladesh governments in crisis and emergency moments such as national election, civil unrest etc. The military and state backup of BGB has already empowered it, however, such practice of expansionism by eliminating public space and swallowing it for its own décor, puts the military administration and non-military, civil urban citizens into a conflicting dialectic and redefines their mutual relationship. The in-built power mechanism that BGB holds and may expose as a form of urban power entails an under-cover cultural discomfort and needless to say, spatial inconvenience. We need to understand that such pervasive spatial practice might end up to embittered liaisons, which has strong impact on the society. The conversion of urban/social space into military space restricts the urban pedestrians automatically from the general right to walk on the footpath forcing them to walk on the street amidst heavy traffic. The pedestrians' status shifts from the rightful side-walkers to unlawful squatters of public street. And, that formulates the implied logic of the sidewalkers' diverted urban mobility. Such spatial practice or spatial (ab/mis)-use has both material consequences such as traffic congestion, accident and abstract consequences such as culture of mutual mistrust, grudge and consequently intolerance. However, though, side walkers

Within the exclusion-occupation parameter, the spatial geography undergoes a dynamic transformation and such transformation helps us locate the social modifications and their impact on the urban space. Thus, academics' concern in social justice or Lefebvrian notion of 'right to city' is a crucial follow-up of the spatial reading of urban space.

Scope for further research

Within the feminist and sociological scope, the first case study may be furthered to investigate into the politics of social and gendered exclusion and how such cultural politics emerge into a novel re-conceptualization of urban space. Considering the second case

study, i.e., military urbanism, we can farther look into the aspects of capitalistic expansionism of military establishments, a phenomenon that David Harvey calls ‘spatial fix’ (2001) and read how such expansionism negotiates with the urban space. Case studies can be conducted on the military-run financial and commercial organizations such as “Shimanto Bank” (BGB-run bank), “Shimanto Square” (BGB-run commercial space), Shimanto Convention Centre (BGB-run convention centre), Shimanto Shambhar (BGB-run super mall) and so on. We can cast a spatial focus on the intersections of urban demography and geography and see if concentration of urban demography is really the one that matters, a concept that alludes to Henri Lefebvre who argued that demography is not the point that causes trouble in urban geography. The intervention of culture, economy, policy and ideology in the restructuring of urban space can be a departure point for urban anthropology in Bangladeshi context. Furthermore, a comparative study between Chinese Military Capitalism and Bangladeshi Military Capitalism may open up new avenues of critical understanding about military urbanization intersected by military capitalism.

Conclusion

Social science research opens up new paradigms of urban space and leads us to an intersectional dynamic understanding of space. Such understanding may contribute to urban planning and urban policy making. The critical insight about a space and its relation to the human agents it accommodates is crucial developing urban epistemology. This essay assumed a socio-spatial perspective of urban sociology in order to explore a few urban places, to interpret how these spaces interact with humans and how, when restructured, these spaces redefine the human-to-human relationship. For the case study of the hijras at the traffic signals, it is crucial for us to understand how a public motorway can serve as a source of informal economy like *tola* collection. Or, for the case study of the BGB headquarters gate, the study of sidewalk and its occupied status can be a vantage point to locate the daily negotiation of inequality and injustice. It is also important to see how the material and infrastructural organization structures our urban experience, i.e., traffic congestion. Besides, paying close attention to urban space and its transformation through the workings of urban economy, politics, power and governance, this essay attempted to understand the heterogeneity of urban space and contestations involved in it. With an understanding of the ideological and socio-economic politics that shape the urban encounters involving the space, such sociological study engages in the academic discussion regarding the perceived, conceived and lived status of space. Lefebvrian approach of spatial study with a Marxist preoccupation thus challenges the monolithic dimension of space; rather opens up the spatial agenda with pluralistic possibilities.

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