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The Role of Roadside Shrines in the Everyday Lives of Female Devotees in Mumbai

Anna Charlotta Osterberg

Introduction

- 1 Gendered assumptions and dispositions pervade our everyday spaces and situations. Feminist geographies have suggested that social constructions of gender have powerful influences in determining spatial experiences of women in a range of different localities. The urban streetscape in Mumbai is an example of such a gendered space, which is perceived and used differently by men and women.¹ However, there has been quite a limited exchange between work on gendered spaces and the geographies of religion and there is hence much scope for future research that aims to integrate space, gender and religion (Hopkins 2015:3–12).
- 2 In her article “Mapping ‘New’ Geographies of Religion: Politics and Poetics in Modernity” Lily Kong emphasizes the relevance of considering the various ways in which religion and place are experienced in by different groups of the population (Kong 2001). Observing women’s habitual practices at roadside shrines in Mumbai presents an opportunity to ask pertinent questions related to gender, spatiality and religion. This article is an attempt to discuss how religious places on the pavements may alter both women’s perception of—and access to—urban public space.
- 3 My hypothesis is that women perceive the affordances of roadside shrines differently depending on their living situations and my aim is to describe how conveniently located and easily accessible religious places fulfill different needs and desires for different women. By “easily accessible,” I refer to shrines which are either in close proximity to where one lives or works, in the vicinity of access points to public transportation, or in other locations where one conducts daily chores.

- 4 While I make an attempt to demonstrate that roadside shrines can increase women's access to public space, I also recognize that these religious places maintain their own internal gender rules. Women do not necessarily have the same spatial freedom at a roadside shrine, or the same kind of access to the statue of the deity or saint, as men do.
- 5 I connect each of these topics of discussion to my recent fieldwork in Mumbai. I conducted extensive fieldwork over approximately twelve months between 2015 and 2018 for my ongoing PhD research.² My perspective on the affordances of roadside shrines in the lives of women took shape during the interactions I had in the course of my fieldwork. While more in-depth interviews could have contributed to an even better understanding of women's experiences, the large quantity of interactions helped reveal a certain pattern related to potential factors that motivate women to spend time at roadside shrines.³ Interviews were conducted in English, Hindi and Marathi and interlocutors had the option to communicate in the language they preferred.⁴
- 6 In this article I will foreground Hindu women's experiences at five shrines, located in Dadar and Khar. I have chosen to focus on these spots because they provide examples of shrine visitors from different socio-economic backgrounds with different time allocation patterns for their devotional activities, which I will describe below.
- 7 I will provide examples from three roadside shrines in Dadar, located on two parallel residential lanes with a majority middle class Hindu population. On VS Agashe Marg I interviewed devotees at a shrine consecrated to Śiva, as well as at a shrine for a Maharashtrian saint from Shegaon, known as Gajānan Mahārāj. On Krushnamji Waman Shitale Marg I interviewed devotees at a shrine for Sai Baba of Shirdi. All the tree shrines are fairly similar in their materiality and seem to attract a similar crowd.⁵ All the tree shrines have blocked the entire pavement from the building behind to the street.

Figure 1

The Gajānan Mahārāj Mandir on VS Agashe Marg
Photographed in April 2017

- 8 In Khar, I interacted with visitors at two Hanumān shrines that are placed at roundabouts, one in Khar Danda and the other one at Madhu Park. In contrast to Dadar, these well-known Hanumān shrines in Khar relatively frequently engage upper class

devotees from nearby areas as well as a larger number of people belonging to the lower social strata who may benefit financially from upper class visitors.

Figure 2

The popular Hanumān Mandir in Khar Danda

Spatiality and Roadside Shrines

- 9 Roadside shrines,⁶ representing a variety of deities and saints, play an integral role in the everyday religious experiences of many citizens of Mumbai, particularly those that live in close proximity to them. The presence of divine images and objects situated on the pavements, or within buildings facing the street front, modifies the spatial experiences, movements and perceptions of people and—as I will argue in this article—particularly the experiences of women.
- 10 An image or “idol” (i.e., a three-dimensional material representation) of a deity—by being situated at a particular spot—has the agency to make many passersby stop or alter their direction of movement. While some people may quickly turn around and perform a gesture of respect towards a shrine, others pause and perform a more elaborate ritual for the divinity, or even sit down for a moment of contemplation.
- 11 For some visitors roadside shrines figure as the central destination that maps out their evening walks, while others include a swift pit stop to the shrine as a part of the commute between their home and workplace. Enshrined divinities usually attract visitors who live or work on the same street or within the same neighborhood and who either walk to the shrine by choice or who happen to pass by it. Most of the female devotees that I have spoken to live within a one—or two—kilometer radius from the shrine where I met them, although some travel up to five-six kilometers and very few cover even longer distances of 10 or 20 kilometers. Interlocutors usually gave rough estimates in regards to how far they live, such as “just down this road” or “maybe two-three kilometers away.” Big and more established shrines attract visitors from further away compared to tiny structures.

- 12 It can be observed that there are three types of visits to shrines: 1) Intentional visits to the shrines wherein the visit to the shrine is either the only goal for stepping outside or one of the main goals, 2) a pause by—or any kind of acknowledgement of—the shrine as an addition to a routine activity, such as commuting to the office or grocery store, and finally 3) a sporadic or surprise interruption when one happens to pass by a shrine, such as when one encounters a shrine while walking on an unfamiliar road.⁷ In this article my focus is on the first type of visits.

Roadside Shrines and Women's Spatial Agency

We argue that there is an unspoken assumption that a loitering woman is up to no good. She is either mad or bad or dangerous to society. Of course, no one actually says this out loud. But every little girl is brought up to know that she must walk a straight line between home and school, home and office, home and her friend or relative's home, from one 'sheltered' space to another.

(Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011:vii)

- 13 Mumbai, despite being considered the most modern and progressive city in India, is nevertheless a city where women are cognizant of their public movements and how they could be perceived. Respectable middle or upper class women would refrain from any activity that could be construed as inappropriate loitering in public spaces. As per Phadke et al. (2011), women in Mumbai have to demonstrate both visible purpose and respectability each time they step outdoors (Phadke et al. 2011:169, 77).
- 14 The bodily demonstration of purpose is a way in which women negotiate access to public space while maintaining their "respectability." In order to do so, women are cognizant of their body language; they walk in goal-oriented ways and they wait in appropriate places. When forced to wait in a public space women tend to prefer places that can be tied to a legitimate purpose such as a commuting. A train or bus stop could be a natural choice, but a religious place would function equally well if not better, as such a place also helps project an image of the ideal virtuous woman.⁸ The demonstration of religiosity is an important marker of respectable womanhood in India. Visits to religious places provide women legitimate and everyday access to the world outside their homes (Phadke et al. 2011:34–6).
- 15 The importance of respectability in public spaces is best understood when viewed in the context of women's role in the public sphere overall. Bagchi (2014) discusses how Indian society's strong bonds with tradition is one reason for persistent gender inequalities. According to traditional views, women are the key to the wellbeing of the family. Equipped with virtues such as purity, sacrifice and care, women have been held responsible for bringing happiness and prosperity to the family. Despite a rising consciousness against gender discrimination and increased negotiations between the realms of the "public" and the "private," the dominance of the private in Indian women's lives is still significant. Traditional social divisions and practices are still active in Indian society and according to Bagchi, the Hindu view of the ideal woman is nurtured both at the normative and practical level in everyday life. Women in contemporary India are faced with obligations to remain attached to the private sphere while simultaneously making efforts to participate in the public sphere. Striking a balance between the traditionally idealized woman who is attached to the domestic space and the modern educated woman who partakes in public activities is a present-day challenge (Bagchi 2014:3–29).⁹

- 16 I argue that visits to religious places on pavements is one way in which women in Mumbai negotiate access to public space without having to compromise on their respectability. Further, visits to roadside shrines give women tied up with a wide range of domestic responsibilities a moment of restorative “me-time,” as they venture out of their homes to “meet *bhagvān* or *bābā*.”¹⁰
- 17 The women who I have interviewed at roadside shrines have voiced that they come to these shrines—often to sit for a while—in order to get peace of mind before returning home to resume their daily chores. Instead of merely going to sit on a bench in a park to relax one “goes to the temple”—often to pray for the benefit of one’s family members. In other words, one engages in both an unselfish and desirable activity, making no compromise in regards to one’s virtuous and family centered values.

Roadside Shrines as Recreational Spaces

- 18 My assistant Preet and I interviewed Rekha, Meera, Seema and Sneha by the Shree Puratan Shiv Mandir in Dadar on a Monday evening. A male devotee was also listening to parts of our conversation and frequently commented on some of the matters that were discussed.
- 19 The four women we spoke to were in their 60s and they lived in the same residential area, a short walking distance from the shrine. They also followed a fairly similar routine in regards to their shrine visits. While Rekha, Meera and Sneha said that they visit the shrine once a day, Seema said that she sometimes comes both in the morning and evening. We were informed that “all the ladies in the area come to sit at the shrine.” Rekha told us that there are usually more women present but on this particular day there were not as many as normally. The male devotee confirmed what the women were narrating. “Between 6–7 pm they all come. They come every day. They can walk and come, they stay that close.”
- 20 We asked the women what they did before and what they were going to do after the visit to the shrine. They told us that they were engaged in domestic work such as washing utensils and clothes before they came and that they would soon return home to make dinner. When we asked them what they usually do when they come to the shrine they started laughing and said that they talk about what is going on at home. “What did you make today? Is food ready? That kind of stuff.” It became evident during our conversation that the everyday routine was about the home and the shrine visits. The time spent at the shrine appeared to be the only time spent outside the home, in addition to grocery shopping and taking care of other essential things. Here the male devotee interrupted us again: “They do not do any work. They are not service people!”
- 21 The women do not enter the sanctum sanctorum (*garbha griha*). Instead they quickly perform *namaskār* from outside and sit down to relax and talk. “They only take *darśana* from outside,” the male devotee testified. The women further explained that they have problems with their knees and therefore they avoid entering the sanctum sanctorum, which may well be a genuine reason to avoid walking up and down the stairs. Whatever the case may be, my intention is not to question their faith or the importance of rituals for these women, but to show that they value the shrine also for its other affordances: as a space for recreation and relaxation. During the interview, Meera openly expressed that

she dislikes being at home and prefers to spend time at the shrine instead, whereas Rekha said that she feels very good and comfortable when she sits there.

- 22 At 7 pm everyone apart from Rekha suddenly excused themselves as they noticed it was time to go home to make dinner. Preet and I got a chance to learn more about Rekha's life. Rekha has had a fairly challenging life supporting her four young children after her husband passed away. She used to stitch clothes for Air India, and she told us that she used to have to work hard to make ends meet. Today her children are married, she is financially stable, and her everyday life appears to be structured around a uniform routine. The shrine is the space where she and other women from the neighborhood go out to enjoy the early evening, before returning to their domestic responsibilities.

Figure 3

Shree Puratan Shiv Mandir on VS Agashe Marg

- 23 Here one could ask if it is the social factor that is the main motivating force that propels women to visit roadside shrines rather than merely seeking access to greater spatial freedom. I have observed variety in regards to women's attitudes towards social interaction at shrines. While some say that they meet their friends, others mention that they might say a little hi-hello "to acquaintances, and a third group of women avoid social interaction completely.
- 24 An interview with a 51-year old woman at the Gajānan Mahārāj Mandir at the other end of Agashe Marg highlights how some women seek solitude rather than company.
- If I'm doing this I feel very peaceful. Me-time you know, I feel this is me-time for myself.
- Do you talk to anyone when you are here?**
- Frankly speaking, I don't do any of that. Sorry to say, but I don't connect to this, whatever people do who are coming here, because many of them they do, they start bitching, gossiping, all those things. I'm not interested in that. I am coming for many years, there are many people who are coming for many years, but it is just "hi, hello. "Many of times, I don't know their first names also.
- (Akanksha 51, Gajānan Mahārāj mandir, Dadar)
- 25 At the other end of Agashe Marg, we met Akanksha who is an English speaking woman born and brought up in the area. Akanksha told us that she is divorced and that she has a

grown-up son.¹¹ She works in an office nearby and likes to spend 30–40 minutes at the shrine to turn her attention inwards, away from daily matters. Akanksha also explained that she feels that every person has several responsibilities to take care of in the worldly life. She is not really interested in socializing and attending events such as weddings but she feels compelled to do it. I get the impression that coming to the shrine is a justified reason for Akanksha to spend time alone.

- 26 Manju, who is the same age as Akanksha, expressed similar opinions:

Whom do you meet when you come?

No one. I just sit here for 5–10 minutes and leave because I have work at home to take care of. I will go home to prepare food. I have to cook twice a day.

Would you stay for longer time if you didn't have to cook?

It's not like that. I generally don't talk to anyone, I don't like it. Why should we talk about what is happening here and there? (*idhar ka udhar karna*, a phrase used when referring to gossip.

(Manju, 51, Shree Puratan Shiv Mandir, Dadar)

- 27 Manju is a housewife who lives in Agar Bazaar in Prabhadevi. She has a daughter and a son who are currently studying, and she prays that her son can continue higher studies in engineering and that her daughter will find a good husband. She also prays that everyone remains happy in her childhood home as well as in her current home where she lives with her in-laws. Manju prefers to go to the shrine instead of sitting idle at home whenever she has free time.

It is not that I have to come so I come. I feel like coming so I come here. That much time I have, because otherwise I will just sit at home.

(Manju, 51, Shree Puratan Shiv Mandir, Dadar)

Roadside Shrines as Extensions of the Everyday Lived Space

- 28 While some women may look for a break in their normal daily routine, others may look for an escape from unpleasant circumstances. Our conversation with Aarti at the Sai Baba shrine on Krushnamji Waman Shitale Road revealed how a roadside shrine can be a space for someone who does not know where else to go. Aarti used to do a government job at BSNL¹² but is now retired. She has two sons who work at the Oberoi and the Leela respectively. Aarti was sitting alone at the shrine at 10.30 pm. Our conversation revealed that she was quite unhappy in her home. She currently lives with her younger son, her daughter-in-law and their son. She feels that the house is too small for them to share, and her elder son who currently lives in Navi Mumbai has stopped talking to her because she refuses to give the apartment to him. Aarti therefore sits at the shrine daily between 7.30 pm to 10.30 pm to get peace of mind and in the afternoons she sometimes visits the Siddhivinayak temple. Religious places are the only places she can think of going to outside of her home.

Figure 4

Women sitting at the Sai Baba shrine on Krushnamji Waman Shitale Road

- 29 Shilpa, a recently widowed woman whom we met by the Shiv *mandir* also demonstrated through her words and emotional expressions how roadside shrines can be places one turns to when the home no longer feels comfortable. During most of the interview Shilpa spoke about her faith in the shrine and Śiva. It was only in the end that she revealed how the shrine may also be helping her in other ways.

So, how did I speak?

Good...?

My son beats me. My daughter in law doesn't give me food to eat.

(Shilpa, 68, Shree Puratan Shiv Mandir, Dadar)

- 30 Shilpa started crying and we ended the interview. Her last two sentences revealed that it is not just her faith in Śiva that attracts her to the shrine, but also her desire to get away from her home. The fact that she asked how she spoke in her interview could indicate that some of what she said about her religiosity was a performance. We further learned that she is from Worli but the building where she normally stays is under redevelopment and she currently rents somewhere near the *mandir*. The consideration of easy access almost without exceptions seems to play a role in how women choose the shrines that they visit.
- 31 Through the examples above I have demonstrated that religious spots in the nearby vicinity are important places for women as extensions to their lived space. The types of roadside shrines that I have discussed in Dadar are special in terms of their structure and affordances, because in these medium sized and not overly-popular spots situated at residential lanes one can sit for a long time, unlike in highly popular and crowded temples. For women like Aarti or Shilpa, big temples where they would get pushed forward in a line would not serve the purpose of enabling them to spend time relaxing outside their homes. I presume that as a respectable middle-class woman, Aarti would also be uncomfortable sitting on a bench out in the open until 10.30 pm, which is the time she usually goes back home. Similarly, a working woman like Akanksha would not get the same peace of mind in a crowded temple that she gets while sitting in front of Gajānan Mahārāj on Agashe Marg.

Shrines and Security

- 32 The examples above serve to demonstrate that one of the affordances of roadside shrines is that they extend the lived space for women who fall into the wide—and hard to define—middle class bracket in Mumbai.¹³ Other affordances may be more relevant for women belonging to the lower social strata.
- 33 Women belonging to the lower social strata often have to work hard in public spaces and they constitute a significant part of India's cheap labor force. Bagchi points out that they rarely have the comfort of a home with separate segments demarcated as the *andar* and *bahar*. The presence of women belonging to a low class and caste in the public sphere can largely be seen as an outcome of the compulsion of economics (Bagchi 2014:33).
- 34 Women who live on the pavement or are situated in public space due to the nature of their work, may navigate the streets more freely than middle or upper-class women, although they encounter other roadblocks instead. I have interacted with several women belonging to a lower socioeconomic class who beg or work on the pavement outside shrines. One of them expressed how she prays from a distance, to avoid possibly upsetting people by her presence near the deities:
- They let me inside, but I do not go. They shouldn't think that we beggars also come inside, they shouldn't feel bad. Because sometimes if a person is not allowed to touch anything they will not like it so we do not go. We choose not to go so that people shouldn't feel bad so we do not go inside.
(Vanita 36, Ghanteshwar Mandir, Khar)
- 35 For Vanita the pavement is a space where she can roam around relatively freely, whereas being close to a murti feels inappropriate. During our conversation she expressed how the shrine helps her in her everyday life. She sits outside it for three practical and interrelated reasons. While Vanita works as a cook during the day she also makes money by receiving donations from shrine visitors. By spending a couple of hours near the shrine, she earns between 200–400 Rupees (approximately 3–6 dollars), which is a considerable amount considering the fact that women get paid approximately 100 Rupees for sweeping and mopping the floors of a large apartment in the same area. The shrine is also located right outside a park, so her children have a place to play while she begs. Thirdly, she feels safe in the area because of the shrine. The aspect of safety is especially important to her.
- First it was very silent here, no streetlights. Nobody would come here earlier, people would be afraid of coming here. It was scary here. Something will happen, someone might get murdered. It was terrible here. Now we feel safe even if we sleep here at night. Because the *mandir* is here so the police keeps patrolling through the night. There is no such fear now.
- I asked her again later during our conversation: **What are the effects of the *mandir* being on the road?**
- Since there is a temple I am not afraid of anything. We know someone is always going to the *mandir*, and if at night someone comes to steal anything they will also think someone might be awake in the *mandir*. The watchman has been here 3–4 years now. There was no watchman before. There were thefts of sandals and things belonging to the *mandir* so they kept a watchman.
- 36 I have met several women who, like Vanita, make extra income either by begging or working around shrines. Women belonging to the lower social strata conduct various jobs associated with roadside shrines, such as selling items used for rituals, or working as

caretakers of “holy cows” situated outside shrines.¹⁴ If roadside shrines increase spatial agency for middle class women, they increase the feeling of personal and financial security for women belonging to the lower social strata.

Figure 5

Women making an income outside the Hanumān Mandir in Khar Danda by providing an opportunity to make offerings to Nāg-devatā

A High Speed Connection to Hanumān

- 37 I often encountered women belonging to the lower social strata outside roadside shrines that seemed popular amongst upper class visitors. While I decoded that the opportunity to receive donations was one of the factors that attracted women with certain economic needs to these locations, I was curious to understand how privileged women from areas like Bandra and Khar¹⁵ perceived the affordances of roadside shrines.
- 38 To learn more about the role of roadside shrines in the everyday lives of upper class women, Preet and I waited around the two frequently visited Hanumān shrines in Madhu Park and Khar Danda. Middle class respondents had told us that the rich and famous jump out of their fancy BMW's" outside these shrines. We noticed a woman dressed in stylish clothes leaving the Pimpleshwar Hanumān Mandir in Khar Danda and followed her across the busy traffic junction. She turned out to be an actress and, in her own words, a known face on social media.¹⁶

Figure 6

The inside of the Hanuman Mandir in Khar Danda also has *mūrti*'s of Shani and Sai Baba of Shirdi

- 39 Shivani (26 years) said that the shrine purifies her of negative energy. She believes that a shrine is a place filled with good vibrations and the older the shrine is, the stronger the vibrations, because so many people have been praying there.
- 40 Shivani also said that visiting a shrine is a polite gesture. Although one can meet friends anywhere, it is desirable to sometimes visit them in their homes. Similarly, the shrine is Hanumān's home, and therefore we visit it, although we could connect with Hanumān anywhere. Further, by keeping a shrine in her own home she likewise welcomes Hanumān to visit her. Her relationship with the deity is hence quite similar to a relationship with a human being, where one pays respect by engaging in polite visits and by being a good host.
- 41 Lastly, Shivani stated that "shrines are like certain spots where the Wi-Fi is good." Smiling, she explained that you can connect with Hanumān wherever you are but just as a Wi-Fi connection is better in certain places than in others, shrines are places where the connection to Hanumān is stronger. "It is all about vibrations. Latitude, longitude, points on earth where the vibrations are right. The *mūrti* has got positive vibrations around it."
- 42 Shivani gave both Preet and me a warm hug and ran home to change into her gym attire to commence her next activity. It was evident that Shivani's daily routine looked different from the middle-class women I met in Dadar, also from a spatial perspective. It did not seem as if Shivani needed the shrine in order to pass the time or get a break from domestic chores, as was the case for many middle-class interlocutors. She seemed very upbeat during our entire conversation, eager to share her religious views, but also in a bit of a hurry to fit all her activities into her busy schedule. I got the same hurried and goal-oriented feeling while speaking to another upper-class respondent by the same shrine.
- 43 I watched from a short distance as Rashi entered the Hanumān *mandir* and quickly performed a prayer ritual, which involved folding her hands in *namaskār* and closing her eyes for a moment. Unlike the other devotees present, she was dressed in western

clothes. She was walking fast and we almost lost her navigating between the rickshaws in the darkness, but once we caught her she was happy to talk. Rashi, who owns a fashion boutique, told us that she used to live abroad and be a real party animal. She moved to India when she got married and after that she faced many challenges, such as going through a difficult divorce and caring for her seriously ill daughter. During our conversation she explained that when one faces any kind of problems it is important to go straight to god for help. One should not listen to what other people say or follow religious rituals, but seek to establish a direct connection to god. When Rashi goes to a shrine, she asks god for help directly. She further explained:

Indian females are stupid, they want to fast on this day, they want to pray at a particular time. For me, all gods are one and the same. I do not believe in all this, I go to all the temples all the time, anytime I feel like. Indian ladies say we should do this and we should do that. They leave their house to go to the temple at a particular time. They need to understand that the house is the first priority, then the temple. You should keep everyone happy first, then only god will be happy.

(Rashi, Khar Danda, approximately 45 years)

- 44 There is a clear difference in what Shivani and Rashi express in regards to rituals. While Shivani speaks of the importance of visiting Hanumān at his home, Rashi seems to dislike rituals.
- 45 In terms of behavioral and temporal patterns, my observations suggest that women organize and allocate their time differently depending on their backgrounds and individual circumstances. While there are certain common reasons why devotees, regardless of class and gender, visit shrines (for example to ask deities for blessings), I propose that upper class women do not perceive the affordances of roadside shrines in quite the same way as some of the middle or lower class women I have interacted with: as places to sit and relax, socialize, or make an income. Upper class women in Mumbai have other places that they use for recreational activities. They go to Mahalaxmi Race Course or Breach Candy Club to get a “feeling of space.” They go to a luxury spa for a massage or a five star hotel to relax. They go to the gym or get their nails done when they are bored.
- 46 As Bagchi states, women’s space in the public sphere is hierarchized mainly because women of status, wealth and power have greater access to the modalities of the public sphere. Unlike in the West, certain places such as cafés, pubs, literary clubs and societies are accessed by a small fraction of people belonging to the more privileged social classes in India (Bagchi 2014:19, 27).
- 47 This does not mean that privileged women would not want to loiter on the streets and that they would not behave slightly differently where they in Berlin instead of Bandra. Even upper-class women are wary of how they carry themselves in public. Regardless, upper class women have access to more destinations in the city, and when they go to the shrine, they do so because they feel they should *specifically* go to the shrine, either because they have faith that the visit can give them something, like Rashi suggests, or because they believe it is their duty, as Shivani implies in her example of polite visits. Further, shrines without any place to sit seem to attract upper-class devotees, which reveals that they may not appreciate the same affordances of roadside shrines as middle-class women who may spend extensive amounts of time sitting at roadside shrines.¹⁷

Shrines in Gendered Spaces and Shrines as Gendered Spaces

- 48 I claim, along the lines of Phadke et al., that the pavements in Mumbai are heavily gendered spaces, in which women do not navigate as freely as men.¹⁸ Roadside shrines make the pavements more welcoming and accessible for women, by giving them a destination to walk to, and a place to sit. I further argue that they increase women's sense of safety.
- 49 The point of safety needs to be underscored, as it is a recurring theme that women—as well as many men—speak of, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Users of roadside shrines associate these religious spaces with an increased sense of safety in the area. This feeling of safety can be attributed to a variety of factors, ranging from practical to faith based. Firstly, roadside shrines are often lit up during the evening and sometimes late at night. This means that streets that used to be very dark now appear less intimidating. Secondly, shrines attract people to the localities where they are situated, which reduces feelings of potential crimes going unnoticed. As Vanita, who begs outside the Ghanteshwar mandir, stated, she feels like someone will always be awake there throughout the night. An exercise conducted in architecture colleges in Mumbai similarly showed that women prefer to walk on crowded pavements compared to quiet ones and that women generally feel safer in areas where there are more people and there is more activity (Phadke et al. 2011:96–103). My interlocutors also attributed the feeling of safety to their faith. Shivani, the actress whom I spoke to, said that since Indians have faith in the deity, they feel that a shrine brings positive energy to the area. This supports the arguments of scholars who have previously discussed the role of roadside divinities as guardians (see Coccari 1986; Henn 2008).
- 50 Even though women may feel more secure in the vicinity of roadside shrines, shrines are not gender-neutral spaces in themselves. For example, being a woman means that you are expected not to visit a deity while you are menstruating. Not only did several of my female interlocutors inform me that this was a rule that they followed diligently, but I was also sometimes told to stay away from the shrines in case I was on my period. This seemed to be an important rule for many devotees, which shows that boundaries related to our gendered embodiment are present at roadside shrines.¹⁹
- 51 An interview with Bhairavi at the Shiv mandir in Dadar highlights how the shrine is an extension of her lived space, while she at the same time does not have the same freedom of movement as men even there. Bhairavi believes that conducting religious practices is a man's job, and that women should keep a distance from the murti because women have periods. Regardless, she comes to sit at the shrine daily because in her own words she has “nowhere else to go.” Here she can also socialize, which she said is one reason for visiting the shrine.

I don't go inside the mandir. In our Ratnagiri village, there is a Shankar mandir, but women do not enter the temple. So even here, I pray from a distance, I don't go near the statue. This is the practice in our village. Women should not touch Śiva.

Why is this so?

We get monthly periods, that's why we cannot touch the lord. Men, there is no problem, they go. That is why I stand at a distance here, pray and then leave. There (Ratnagiri) I didn't used to do all this. So here (Mumbai) also I don't feel like doing anything. I didn't use to go to the *mandir* at my parents place. I feel awkward now.

At Rawalnath Bhairavi temple, women don't enter the *gabbara* (area where the idol is kept). I even went to Shani Shingnapur. Even there ladies are not allowed to go to the temple. The thought of going inside and praying is very weird. I just pray from a distance.

(Bhairavi, 'beyond 90 years')

- 52 Bhairavi further explained that she does not go anywhere else apart from the mandir and her own home. *I don't go outside*, she said. Bhairavi's words show how roadside shrines help women get access to places outside their homes, but at the same time they are restricted even at these religious spaces.²⁰
- 53 Another example of a gender boundary is the popular perception of how women should conduct themselves in relation to Hanumān and Shani. Both men and women whom I interviewed expressed that women are not allowed to touch Hanumān because he was never married. Similarly and for the same reason, women should never walk in circles around Hanumān.²¹

Giving a Voice to Shrine Visitors

- 54 Previous studies on roadside shrines are limited and have not paid much attention to the everyday experiences of individuals. The few studies that exist have contributed valuable insights into both party politics and the politics of space (Kaur 2005; Sekine 2011). Scholars have also theorized roadside shrines as a problem belonging to the field of visual culture studies (Elison 2014) and have convincingly argued for roadside shrines as a natural solution to processes pertinent to urbanity and modernity (Henn 2008). As I embarked on my own research journey I was curious to understand more about what was driving devotees to visit these shrines on an everyday basis and I felt that the voices of female visitors was missing in previous studies. Going through my data, I realized that roadside shrines have in some way other positively affected all of the women that I have interacted with on the field. Further, I observed that they all spoke about their feelings related to these religious spaces. My interlocutors spoke about how being at the shrines made them "feel happy,"²² peaceful, secure, or somehow connected. I therefore see that there is scope for a further study of the role of feelings and emotions in regards to religious objects and places in urban public space.²³
- 55 However, here some important considerations pertaining to agency emerge. Women may to some degree have to decide what makes them happy according to expectations and the possibilities at hand.²⁴ The increased spatial freedom that shrines provide is freedom within a particular pre-ordained socio-cultural framework and as Phadke et al. point out, these acts of spatial negotiation could be perceived as a double-edged sword. On one hand, they allow women increased access to public space. On the other, this access remains restricted because by acting according to dominant gender structures, women also reinforce them. It is nevertheless easier for women to work within this socially acceptable pre-existing framework in order to access public space and allocate time for relaxation, whether to justify it internally for themselves or externally to their family members and society, than to try to openly rebel against the system (Phadke 2011:40,170). What I propose is not that roadside shrines increase women's spatial freedom in generic terms, but that they provide one socially acceptable destination to visit, thereby extending the lived space of a woman who may otherwise find herself further confined to the domestic sphere.

- 56 To sum up, the various ways in which roadside shrines play a role in individuals' everyday spatial and emotional lives have not been very visible in previous research. I suggest that additional micro-sociological accounts could give us a complimentary perspective to studies on roadside shrines dealing with theories and abstractions on a macro level.

Conclusion

- 57 I have argued that there are variations in regards to how women perceive the affordances of roadside shrines depending on their background, social class and current living situations. I have suggested that one of the affordances of roadside shrines is the possible extension of the lived space for women, and that this is most relevant for middle class women who live a certain traditional lifestyle where they are spatially fairly tied up to the domestic sphere. They articulate verbally, and signal with their expressions, that stepping out of home and spending time at these shrines make them happy.
- 58 My interlocutors, regardless of their background, further associate roadside shrines with safety and security, either personal or financial, depending on their individual needs. Shrines make women feel more at ease around the spots where they exist. I believe that my interlocutors would agree that shrines make the pavements of Mumbai a bit more welcoming for women, and from this perspective interrupt the gender hegemony of the pavements.

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NOTES

1. For example, it is more acceptable for men than women to spend time without a specific purpose in public in Mumbai, which I will discuss further in this article.
2. My PhD project is part of the multi-university project *Dwelling and crossing: The socio-cultural dynamics of religious spaces in Mumbai*, which takes a spatial approach to the study of religion in Mumbai. In my PhD project *Dimensions of religious place-making: Pavement religion* (working title) I am researching roadside shrines and religious objects on the pavements in Khar, Dadar, Byculla and Girgaon.
3. I have so far conducted interviews, or engaged in extended discussions, with 260 people in Mumbai.

4. I would like to thank my fieldwork assistants and translators Preet Kiran Sandhu and Manali Sherkane for their help. Preet and I worked as a team on the field throughout most of my project. While Preet asked questions in Hindi, I could follow the conversation and ask additional questions when required. On a few occasions we worked independently, e.g., when something important was happening in two places at the same time. Manali came to my rescue in January 2018 after Preet left India, to help me with my final interviews.

5. The shrine for Gajānan Mahārāj has been demolished twice since the first draft of the article was written. After the first demolition the shrine was rebuilt three weeks later with financial help from a local resident. In January 2018 the shrine was demolished for the second time and the owners are currently trying to get a legal permission before rebuilding the shrine again. Currently an image of the saint has been kept where the shrine used to be (as per 8th February 2018).

6. When I refer to roadside shrines I mean religious structures of a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Some of them were originally small and improvised structures that have grown over the years and gained a more stable materiality. They may occupy a part of the pavement or take up all the space so that passing pedestrians are forced to temporarily jump off the pavement onto the street in order to continue their journey. Other street facing shrines have expanded “backwards” into buildings and even though they may not occupy much space on the pavement they are very much part of the religious landscape of the urban street, and they have an impact on the movements and body language of pedestrians. Some of the shrines have gained a legal status (for example heritage shrines built prior to 1950) whereas others are unauthorized. While this topic is beyond the scope of this essay it is worth mentioning that the legal status of roadside shrines does not seem to be of much interest to devotees.

7. Roadside shrines tend to interrupt people’s movement from point A to point B when they happen to walk by them, as many Hindus have been brought up to pay due respect to depictions of divinities whenever they cross paths with them. It is as if the deities within the shrines demand attention from the passersby. Interlocutors often mention themselves that this is “how Indians have been brought up” and that it is almost instinctive.

8. I interviewed a 66-year-old woman at the Shree Puratan Shiv Mandir in Dadar. Somewhere midway through the interview she revealed that she was waiting for her friend who was late, and thought that it was better to wait at the shrine instead of somewhere else.

9. See Bagchi 2014:49–65 for information regarding how women’s roles have been defined in ancient India.

10. *Bhagvān* is an epithet for god, whereas the word *bābā* in this context may refer to a respected religious leader or saint represented in a roadside shrine or more specifically to Sai Baba of Shirdi (also known as Shirdi Sai Baba). Sai Baba was an Indian spiritual leader who is regarded by his devotees as a saint, a fakir, or an incarnation of god.

11. Single and divorced women may feel the need to try even harder to prove their respectability and negotiate access to public space compared to women living in familial contexts. Even in Mumbai, single women are often looked upon with some suspicion by housing societies and neighbors. See Phadke 2005:47.

12. *Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited*, a telecommunications company.

13. Loic Wacquant (1991) has stated that difficulties in defining the middle class does not reflect a lack of theoretical penetration, but the character of reality, and this is especially true in a city like Mumbai where individuals described as belonging to the middle class differ so widely in terms of their economic status (Wacquant in McNall, Levine and Fantasia 1991:57). A person’s middle class identity in India is also constructed through many other identities such as caste, gender and religion (Fernandes 2006:xxxiii). I find it helpful to think about “middleclassness”—much in line with the work of Bourdieu—as a product of everyday practices, internalized behaviors and values, as well as a contradictory position vis-à-vis other classes (in this scenario,

the poor or the very rich) (Bourdieu 1984; Donner 2012:6; McNall et al. 1991:51). Middle class, for women in Mumbai, seems to be a category strongly tied to respectability and appropriateness. Unlike *bustee lok* (people from slums) or the urban elite, middle class women are the in-between group who look to strike a balance between being appropriately Indian and traditional, while to some degree keeping up with modern developments (Radhakrishnan 2011). Middle class women's lives are neither characterized by intense struggle nor excessive glamour. This separates them from the urban elite, whose lifestyles they may perceive as excessive and foreign and from the urban poor or who they could even perceive as provincial or vulgar (Liechty 2003). Highlighting various intra-class processes, such as the maintenance of communal moralities, particular gender relations or domestic practices could serve as examples of lived experiences that make middle classness real (Radhakrishnan 2011:5–9; Donner 2012:7–10).

14. I have interviewed 12 women in Mumbai who work with cows near shrines and earn their income through devotees who pay for feeding the cow or come to buy cow urine. These women struggle to make ends meet and most of them are the only earning members of the family.

15. These are areas with a reputation of being slightly different from other parts of Mumbai. It is okay for women to dress and behave more modern or “Western” in Bandra, and a privileged girl from Bandra would—as a general rule or assumption—perceive her opportunities to pursue a variety of activities outside of the domestic sphere differently from a traditional middle class woman in Dadar. See Phadke 2005.

16. Later when asked directly, she subscribed to being both upper class and caste, although she was quick to mention that she does not believe in categorizing people in this manner.

17. There are plenty of religious places in Khar and many of them have places to sit. Regardless, it is the very busy and spatially restrictive Hanumān Mandir at the start of Khar Danda that seems attractive to upper class devotees. If finding a place to sit and relax was essential one could choose another shrine.

18. My understanding of “gendered space” rests on the notion that places are embodied and constructed out of social relations interacting at a particular location. When we add to that a discourse that structures male and female behavior and regulates mobility we have a gendered space (Okland in King 2005:152–53; Massey 1994:168).

19. My intention here is merely to state that there are boundaries at roadside shrines, which are linked to gender. For more insight into the topic of the menstruation taboo *per se* and the reasons why women may have to follow certain rules during menstruation, see, for example, Buckley and Gottlieb's *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, which challenges the widespread image of a universal “menstrual taboo” and contributes important perspectives on our understanding of gender politics, or Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*, which talks about the concept of pollution (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Douglas 2003).

20. One could argue that these are perceived limitations, and that Bhairavi could touch the *murti* if she decided to do so, but as long as these perceived limitations guide people's behavior they have real, practical, consequences.

21. Hanumān's relationship to women is more complex than his popular reputation in Mumbai suggests. In *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey* Philip Lutgendorf demonstrates why the deity's reputation as a confirmed bachelor and exemplary celibate matches only the more recent popular image of the deity, as Hanumān has previously been portrayed also as a god of power and virility who might potentially become a woman's consort and lover (Lutgendorf 2007:299–331).

22. In this context I use “happiness” to mean a state of well-being and calm. Interlocutors often use expressions such as “peace of mind,” “having no tension,” “forgetting all my worries,” “feeling good” or “getting good vibes.” For me, these are expressions of pleasant—sometimes almost bodily—states of being that interlocutors articulate in regards to how they feel at the shrines.

23. I do recognize that making claims about feelings posits challenges. I acknowledge that my arguments rely heavily on self-reports which considered independently may not always be reliable sources of information (Stausberg in Stausberg and Engler 2011:382). Here I believe that observing body language helps. Women often openly—and bodily—expressed joy during our interactions. After interviewing devotees on the field my translator and I would find ourselves having conversations like “did you notice how she was glowing when she spoke about Hanumān?” or “she looked anxious when you asked her about her home.” As Stausberg states, interviews and observations need to complement each other, and the researcher needs to be attentive to various aspects such as the respondent’s facial expressions, gestures, and tone while talking (Stausberg 2011:383; see also Riis and Woodhead 2010).

24. Without entering into a further discussion about the potentially oppressive nature of our current construction of happiness, I recommend Sara Ahmed’s book *The Promise of Happiness* for any readers interested in the topic (Ahmed 2010).

ABSTRACTS

This article aims to better understand the relationship between women, roadside shrines, and the urban streetscape in Mumbai. Our embodied experiences in space are gendered, and whether we are talking about real or imagined opportunities and limitations, men and women perceive, experience and utilize space differently. This article is focused on two central inquiries. Firstly, I look at how roadside shrines in the public space may fulfill different needs for different persons, which to some degree may depend on their gender, age, or socioeconomic class. Secondly, I discuss how roadside shrines may challenge public gendered spaces, while still maintaining their own internal gender rules and boundaries. My central argument is that roadside shrines play a multifaceted and primarily affirmative role in the lives of female visitors, by increasing their sense of spatial agency and feelings of security.

INDEX

Keywords: feminist geography, gender, space, roadside shrines, Mumbai, religion, agency, Hinduism

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