

IJPSL

Volume 3, Issue 3

Women from the Periphery: Experiences of Women in Mumbai's Local Trains

Jina Maria¹

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Declaration

I, Jina Maria, hereby declare that this dissertation entitled “Women from the Periphery: Experiences of Women in Mumbai’s Local Trains” is the outcome of my study undertaken under the guidance of Dr Shewli Kumar, Associate Professor, Center for Women Centered Social Work, School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. It has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, or certificate of this Institute or of any other institute or university. I have duly acknowledged all the sources used by me in the preparation of this dissertation.

Abstract

The centrality of Mumbai’s Suburban Railway network or Mumbai Locals in the lives of the people of Mumbai has been a well-documented one. But the changing urban landscape due to globalization and neo-liberal policies of the State, along with a global pandemic has forced a rethinking of its centrality. In this context, this thesis aims to understand the experiences of women who live in the peripheral areas and commute for work or study to the city centres. It does so by examining what going out to work/study entails for women’s agency and well-being. It shows that the harrowing conditions in the Mumbai Locals complicate the question of whether going out to work necessarily improves the well-being and agency of women. On the other hand, it also shows the significance of the ‘ladies’ compartment’ which represents a critical space of mobility for female Mumbaikars, as a space where women have quietly and collaboratively repurposed public infrastructure to meet their day-to-day needs.

Keywords: *Mumbai, local trains, women’s mobility, globalization, periphery, gender segregation, public transport*

Abbreviations

MMR – Mumbai Metropolitan Region CR – Central Railways

WR – Western Railways

NAE – Non-Agricultural Establishment EMU - Electric Motor Units

MUTP - Mumbai Urban Transport Project GNP – Gross National Product

UNDRR – United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction CAA – Citizenship Amendment Act

NRC – National Register of Citizens LFPR – Labour Force Participation Rate

NSSO – National Sample Survey Organization PTS – Public Transportation System

ITDP - Institute for Transportation & Development Policy CSMT – Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj

Terminus

CST – Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus

MMRDA – Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Overview

The centrality of Mumbai's Suburban Railway network, or Mumbai locals in the lives of the people of Mumbai has been a well-documented one. Although a beaten-to-death cliché, it continues to don the sobriquet, the 'lifeline' of the city and remains part of the city's rich legacy. Since the first train pulled into the Thane station on 16th April 1853, travelling a distance of 34 km, it has continued to serve the people of Mumbai and its suburbs. Now spread over a distance of around 400 kilometres, it carries around 8 million commuters each day, making it one of the busiest and also the second-largest suburban rail network in terms of route length after the Kolkata Suburban Railway.

The Mumbai Locals, for many, is a testimony of the resilience of the people of Mumbai, who brave crushing crowds, floods, stampedes, terrorist attacks and bomb blasts to travel in it daily. They are indelibly knitted into the spatial, economic and social fabric of the city of Mumbai. It is considered to have spurred economic growth in the peripheral areas and deemed the backbone for commuters, especially for those coming in to work in the city centres. The train system not only moves people from home to work and back but, for all its shortcomings, is considered an essential, fairly reliable and efficient public transport system that connects places of leisure, markets, entertainment areas etc. enhancing the social life of Mumbai metropolitan area's residents. It also moves goods and luggage making it central to livelihood practices in the city and its suburbs. Hence, it is a significant aspect not only of the city's culture but also its economy (Bhide et al, 2016).

The significance of this well-connected public transportation system can be attributed to the city's growth over the centuries and the growing need for transporting people to and from different parts of the city. The crowded city space has necessitated the creation of newer satellite towns and cemented the role of the transportation system connecting the city centres to the peripheral suburbs.

While the Mumbai district's last train station is in Kurla, and the Mumbai Suburban district extends till Mulund (for the Central line), Mumbai encompasses a whole lot of places under the ambit of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR). It spans two districts completely (Mumbai and Mumbai Suburban) and three districts partially (Thane, Palghar and Raigad), nine municipal corporations and more than 6,000 square kilometres of land, and is one of the most populous metropolitan areas in the world.

It was the suspension of Mumbai Local trains during the pandemic that brought to light several fault lines in our conception of daily commute and work in this crowded metropolis. Amidst the difficult weeks of the second wave of the Covid pandemic, a leading newspaper editorial penned a poignant piece, "Who is responsible for Mumbai's mess? The answer is simple: Years of apathy under successive governments that sought to treat the city as a cash machine, rather than a living ecosystem. The city of dreams, whose engine is powered by money, does not have enough of anything — roads, housing, buses and trains, schools, hospitals, parks and public places. Before the lockdown last March, an average of seven people lost their lives, daily, on the railway tracks of the city's famed suburban network. But the city that never sleeps chugged on nevertheless, just as it is, now, with an average of 16 deaths from Covid-19 a day for the past week. What the world takes for resilience — evident in that completely inappropriate term for people who go through hell just to make a living, the spirit of Mumbai — is largely resignation." (HT Editorial, 2021)

While researching for this thesis, the author came across countless stories of lives and livelihoods lost, of travel and tussle in the bleak months just after the nationwide lockdowns were announced. While the livelihoods of both men and women were hit, the magnitude of the impact was not necessarily uniform, reiterating what feminists in the field of disaster management have been saying for decades, that men and women experience disasters differently. For example, low levels of private vehicle ownership, increased care responsibilities etc. render the experience of the pandemic a gendered one.

Similarly, class and geography also contribute to the dissimilar experience of the lockdown, as a columnist in a major English daily wrote, "While the benefits of a lockdown preventing the infection from spreading would equally accrue to everyone, the costs will be disproportionately higher for the poor who, unlike the better off, have neither the luxury of working from home nor enough of a savings pool to exhaust while not earning" (Kishore, 2020). With the primary mode of transportation

being shut for the majority of the population, those who live in the suburbs were faced with the option of either remaining at home unemployed or spending the majority of their incomes on their everyday commute. Although several of these fault lines have existed for a long, the pandemic amplified the inequitable nature of the public transportation system and the way the cities have been organized. In this context, the author would like to examine the premise of Amartya Sen's proposition on women's work, well-being and agency. The author would like to do so by exploring the experiences of women's commute to work or study in the Mumbai local trains and the changing urban geography entails for their freedom and agency. Furthermore, the author would like to understand the significance of the ladies' compartment which represents a critical space of mobility for female Mumbaikars (as Mumbai's residents are called). And also look at it as a space where women have quietly and cooperatively repurposed public infrastructure to meet their day-to-day needs in a city that is not designed for them (Dean, 2017).

This thesis draws from Christine Koggel's (2003) work on globalization and its relation with women's paid work and agency. Also, it draws on the theories of insurgent planning and urban informality from Ananya Roy(2003), Asef Bayat(2004) and Faranak Miraftab's (2009) work and its application in the Mumbai locals in Lauren Dean's (2017) thesis. Before exploring the gendered impact of the disaster on women's mobility and livelihood, the author would like to situate the study in a globalized and increasingly liberalized landscape of the city of Mumbai.

1.2 Globalization and the Changing Urban Landscape

The course of Indian history took a new turn with the announcement of the 'LPG' regime in 1992 and heralded a new world order which radically altered our understanding of how policies and activities in one country can have far-reaching consequences for people in other regions and even the entire world. The slew of measures that were introduced also had a markedly profound impact on the way cities and their citizens were governed and perceived. Swapna Banerjee-Guha, in the introductory chapter of her book, addresses how the 'logic of globalization' presupposes the "integration of cities in the global system". This sets the stage for the transformation of internal geography by "changing notions of centrality and marginality". While the centre gets increasingly linked to the expanding global networks, it simultaneously gets delinked from the surrounding peripheral areas. This, she argues, has given rise to a 'crisis of the urban space', an intense spatial crisis, which reflects these "contradictory processes of integration and segmentation". The changes are not uniform, and the benefits accrued from the said transformation of the city only profit certain

sections of society. What is observed is the “..systematic selection of modern urban functions in specific areas, relocation of poor people and less profitable activities to the periphery and their replacement by newer functions, mega-structures and modern infrastructure.”

Banerjee-Guha further contends how neoliberalism at the city level is characterized by “privatisation of basic services, withdrawal of the state from urban development, escalating support for public-private partnerships, especially in infrastructure projects, increasing gentrification to expand space for elitist consumption, and a growing exposure to global competition reflecting the power of a disciplinary finance regime and a hegemonic cultural framework” (Banerjee-Guha, 2010, p. 2). The author would like to draw out the above-mentioned characteristics observable in the city of Mumbai by concentrating on three important aspects– the changing job scenario, the creation of “dormitory towns” and the gradually privatizing public transportation system.

1.3 Globalizing Mumbai

Several authors have identified this process playing out in the increasingly globalized landscape of the city of Mumbai. Mumbai is losing its sheen as the city of dreams, as, firstly, a large number of jobs are no longer seen as attractive, or “sufficiently investment friendly, acceptable to the credit rating agencies (to) help them emerge as geo-strategic points to further neoliberalism in the Global South” (Banerjee-Guha, 2010, p. 203). The economic census of Maharashtra also reflects the movement of “less profitable activities” to the peripheral regions, away from the MMR. As part of remodelling the city as a ‘world-class city’, which “function as nodes of circulation of global finance and hi-tech activities of diverse nature”, both agricultural establishments and non-agricultural establishments (NAE) are packing up and leaving. Analysing economic data from Maharashtra, Singh observes,

“Since the early 1980s, many large manufacturing units in the textile sector closed down and moved to other functions including exploiting the fixed land asset as real estate, creating new centres of residences as well as skilled employment. At the same time, other heavy industries started shifting to other places as a part of the policy of decongestion of the city, enforcement of an industrial relocation policy and cheaper land availability and infrastructure facilities in locations like Navi Mumbai. Some moved to neighbouring Gujarat state. This resulted in a shift to establishments that employed a lower number of workers.” (Singh, 2010, p. 19)

Secondly, Mumbai is also witnessing the phenomena of increasing gentrification with the city being unable to accommodate the large number of people coming in in search of a job. Studying the migration patterns in the city of Mumbai and the neighbouring Thane and Navi Mumbai, Singh (2010) notes that while the two districts of Mumbai have increased by merely five lakh, during the same period, the neighbouring district of Thane has increased by 3.5 million, mainly due to shift of population from Mumbai to Thane district. It saw migrations not just from Mumbai, but migrants from other parts of the state and country. The creation of the satellite city Navi Mumbai was also towards this end, decongesting the crowded city of Mumbai. As real estate prices in the city shoot skyward each year, the cost of affording a house is not within the reach of most households, which further encourages the shift of population towards what he calls “dormitory towns”. This means that except in Navi Mumbai, where 60% of its population work within its limits, more and more people “depend on Mumbai for their livelihood than on places where they live. Every day people commute in harrowing conditions to Mumbai for their jobs and other economic activities, stretching the infrastructure” (ibid, p. 20).

Hence, shrinking livelihoods in the city coupled with growing dependence on Mumbai to provide for jobs remains as the backdrop while basic services are being privatized. In his paper, “Urban Transport Projects in a Globalised Scenario”, Darryl D’Monte notes, “There has been heavy investment in a plethora of roadways and a near-total neglect of public transport in a metropolis where the overwhelming majority relies on this mode to commute to work.” (Banerjee-Guha, 2010, p. 169). Compared to the paltry Rs. 7000¹ crores (revised cost) for the Mumbai Urban Transport Project (MUTP) Phase II (which aims at increasing the capacity of the existing train services), the Mumbai Coastal Road Project itself costs Rs. 12,000 crores², not to mention the money spent on other road networks, freeways, flyovers and sea links.

This is an alarming prospect for a city like Mumbai where, according to the Atkins report, 83 per cent of the passenger trips in peak hours were by public transport (train and bus), another 8 per cent by ‘intermediate public transport’ (taxis and three-wheelers) and only 9 per cent by private transport (both cars and two-wheelers) (Banerjee-Guha, 2010). Instead of increasing the capacity of the Mumbai Locals, the municipal governing body of the city, the BMC is aiming to modernize the

¹According to the MMRDA website.

<https://mmrda.maharashtra.gov.in/mumbai-urban-transport-project-2>

² Singh L., Bhalerao. S. The Road by the Sea. (March 18, 2021). Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com/>

public transport infrastructure by introducing the Mumbai Metro through a public-private partnership. Line 1 (which runs from Ghatkopar to Versova and is the only operational one currently) was a joint venture between Reliance Infrastructure (who owned the majority stake) along with MMRDA and Veolia Transport³. Since then, it has taken on to build thirteen more lines, nine of which are under construction. The author would like to further explore the gendered aspect of the above issue and examine the centrality of public transport in the lives of women.

1.4 The Centrality of Public Transport in the Lives of Women

If we look at the use of public transport, it is seen that public transportation systems (PTS) like buses are the most common mode of transport after walking for women. While for men, the most commonly used modes of transport are walking, cycling and riding a bike or scooter (Census, 2011). Women are more likely to rely on public transport than men for many reasons such as a lower rate of asset ownership and fewer finances to pay for the commute (Rukmini S, 2014).

Women have inadequate access to both private and public transport within any given urban setting, while at the same time taking on a higher share of the travel responsibility of their household and having more journeys associated with reproductive and caretaking responsibilities (Peters, 2013). Women make complex chain journeys that involve a greater number of trips and a variety of routes, within a restricted geographical area (Duchène, 2011). This is to incorporate their work and care duties – for example, women will drop a child at school on the way to work, or they will interrupt their travels to buy groceries while returning from work. Hence, the travel patterns for women are distinct from those of men, and those variations are marked by enduring disparities. It is important to note here that these differences in travel patterns are observed in both developed as well as developing nations, in rural as well as urban areas (ibid).

Public transport is an important enabler for entry to the public realm, with access denial impacting women throughout their lives. For example, keeping girls away from school and college is common because there is no safe transport available (Latif 1999; Fernando and Porter 2002, p. 10). The Mumbai locals also play a crucial role in increasing the mobility of women because of its affordability. In a recent study funded by Indian Railways, more than three-fourths of commuters in the lowest income bracket surveyed reported that they considered travel on the Mumbai Local to be affordable. The interesting aspect to note here is that the percentage of women who found it

³Reliance Infrastructure later opted for selling back its stake to MMRDA citing fare structure and losses incurred. The MMRDA is currently conducting due-diligence of the Metro assets (Lewis, 2021).

affordable spans all income groups (Dean, 2017, p. 29). Speaking about the ladies' compartment within the Mumbai locals, Dean comments, "The ladies' compartment not only offers women a safer space for commuting but also acts as an extension of the domestic sphere where women can work and socialize in a way that is not allowed in other public spaces in the city" (ibid, p. 39).

To summarize, in the words of the ITDP report authors, "Ultimately, transportation is the fulcrum that allows women to participate in the workforce, which can create a societal shift to transform the entire world economy" (Shah et al, 2017, p. 1). Hence, the physical mobility that public transport affords to women goes a long way in empowering them.

1.5 Women's Work, Well-Being and Agency

The significance of paid work in improving women's well-being is now a well-established concept. Most feminists concur that women's right to paid work is a necessary, but not sufficient precondition for women's empowerment. Extensive work by Amartya Sen, Jean Dreze, Martha Chen and others has cemented the articulation of paid employment as a women's rights issue, as a matter of justice. Martha Chen, in her essay, "A Matter of Survival: Women's Right to Employment in India and Bangladesh", formulated what she called 'gainful' employment as not just "a matter of immediate survival for individual women and their families" (Chen, 1995), but drawing from the works of Sen and Dreze, she conceptualized paid work to be a matter (although indirectly) of female mortality rates, as a matter (determinant) of women's status; and as a matter of human justice.

This formulation of paid work as a rights or human justice issue can be attributed to Sen's work in development theories and his concept of the capabilities approach. Sen regarded development as expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Expanding freedoms is seen as the primary objective (end) as well as the principal means of achieving development. Development, hence, consists of the removal of various types of 'unfreedoms' or constraints that leave people with little choice and opportunity (Sen, 1999).

To expand this proposition towards women's right to paid employment, he makes a crucial distinction between approaching development from the perspective of well-being versus that of the agency. In his essay, "Women's Agency and Social Change" from his seminal book *Development as Freedom* (1999), he argues that within women's movements, there has been a gradual evolution from focusing on women's well-being, which is "welfarist" in nature, towards emphasizing the active role of women's agency. This shift in focus, or 'addition' rather, is crucial, because agency can play a vital role "in removing the iniquities that depress the well-being of women" (ibid). He further claims

that “women's well-being is strongly influenced by such variables as women's ability to earn an independent income, to find employment outside the home..”

Although in his chapter he focuses on three important aspects (female education, female employment and female ownership rights), I would be concentrating on women's earning power and economic role outside the family. He writes about the advantages of these, “working outside the home and earning an independent income tend to have a clear impact on enhancing the social standing of a woman in the household and the society. Her contribution to the prosperity of the family is then more visible, and she also has more voice, because of being less dependent on others. Further, outside employment often has useful "educational" effects, in terms of exposure to the world outside the household, making her agency more effective.” (Sen, 1999, p. 191). Hence, he concludes, “Freedom in one area (that of being able to work outside the household) seems to help to foster freedom in others (in enhancing freedom from hunger, illness and relative deprivation).”

1.6 Women's Paid Work in the Context of Globalization and Pandemic

Christine Koggel (2003), in her essay “Globalization and Women's paid work” provides a further complication (or critique) of Sen's theory of expanding the freedoms of women as crucial in increasing their well-being. Drawing from the works of Mohanty C (1988), Mies M (1982), Elson D(1981), Pearson R (1998) and others, she essentially asks the question, “whether paid employment necessarily increases women's freedom and agency in all places and, specifically, under conditions of globalization” (Koggel, 2003, p. 165). She goes on to illustrate how global forces of power and local systems of oppression operate and interact in ways that limit women's freedom and agency even when they have paid work.

Koggel discusses the factors that might affect the expansion of women's agency and well-being when they do pay work outside their homes. She notes how multinational executives and big financial houses are driven solely by profit maximisation and cost minimisation, not the improvement of women's workforce participation or their freedom and agency. Hence, she argues that providing women with jobs is as insufficient an index of social and economic advancement as growth in GNP or income levels. She suggests that there might be several factors like the location of the work, whether they have domestic responsibility in addition to paid work, whether they work in a formal or informal sector, etc. which “sometimes enhance, but often limit, women's freedom and agency” (ibid, p. 167).

In the context of India, when it comes to paid work, India has one of the lowest-ranked Female Labour Force Participation Rates (the share of women between the age of 15-64 who are working or are actively looking for work) in the world and it has been declining at a rapid rate (Rukmini S, 2019). It fell from 30% in 1999-2000 to around 25% in 2011-2012. Although this fall is largely driven by a sharp decline in rural female LFPR, the NSSO data suggests that the urban female LFPR has also remained stagnant. In urban India, women's labour force participation is a paltry 15.5 per cent (MoSPI 2014).

Various researchers and academics have analysed the 'invisibility' of women's labour from the economy and the underlying reasons behind the falling participation rate of women in the labour force. According to Deshpande (2019), Care work and domestic responsibilities are keeping more and more women from working, while a majority of those who do express a desire to work, wish to do so only if it is made available at or near their home. A study by Hanson and Pratt (1998), similarly showed that household responsibilities often deter women from commuting long distances to work.

The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown have not changed to any extent the amount of unpaid work done by women (SEWA, 2020; Deshpande, 2020). Women's care burden has only increased during the lockdown period. This can be attributed to the lack of childcare as the lockdowns shut all schools and creches, leaving women to spend more time in childcare. Due to this, a paper written by researchers at the Azim Premji University based on CMIE-CPHS data found that not only were women seven times more likely to lose jobs during the pandemic but women were 11 times more likely to not return to work subsequently (Bose, 2021).

But research also suggests that besides household responsibilities, notions of safety and risk also contribute to a lower percentage of women commuting to work, as well as undermining their confidence (Harrison, 2012). Hence, some of the factors that I would like to explore primarily are the location of work, the commute to work, and domestic responsibilities of women and what it entails for their well-being and agency.

1.7 Gender and Access to Public Space

Women's access to the public sphere has not only led to an increase in income but also in how they view themselves and are viewed by others. Aladuwaka and Oberhauser (2011) note in their research on microcredit activities of women in the Kandy district of Sri Lanka, that the increased mobility of women borrowers who travel to other areas to sell their products has led to higher independence

from their spouses and an increased level of visibility within their community, which has positively affected their confidence and self-esteem (Aladuwaka & Oberhauser, 2011, p. 259). Hence, it is asserted that gender violence, through its effects on a woman's ability to act, can serve as a hurdle to socio-economic development (Mathur, 2004, p. 34) and limit women's productivity.

In comparison, ActionAid (2011) states that in Nepal, following a series of political developments, such as increased women's participation in state agencies and the establishment of institutions such as the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare and the National Women's Commission, women are often still expected to perform roles and occupy spaces defined by traditional cultural norms, such as not leaving the house without a male family member. Such norms continued in a sense in many urban women took on new labour obligations as they moved to towns and adjusted to post-conflict transformation (ActionAid, 2011, p. 49).

ActionAid's research found that women experience a wide variety of undesirable consequences as a result of harassment on public transport, such as "negative psychological impacts, including a decrease in confidence and self-esteem, feelings of blame, frustration, and mistrust or hate of men. Women lost concentration and productivity in the workplace and in serious cases, have lost their jobs as a result" (ActionAid, 2011, p. 56).

Such experiences have everyday costs, as shown in ActionAid's research with women working in the informal sector in Nepal, that to avoid taking public buses (on which they were likely to face harassment) where the market with the least expensive goods is located, women had to either spend more time taking alternative routes and vehicles or visit the more expensive market area to buy what they needed. Hence, the threat of sexual harassment in the public space not only affects women's self-esteem and confidence but also hinders women's right to perform livelihood functions by disallowing them from the Public Transportation System. On the other side of the debate are authors who question the traditional response to increased sexual harassment in public spaces, that of limiting women's physical mobility.

The Delhi Human Development Report (2006) notes that the approach of avoiding certain areas or all public spaces, actually increases the vulnerability of women, as in addition to restricting their freedom and autonomy it also forces them to live in fear and internalize the feeling that they are victims, as well as making them alone responsible for their safety (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2006, p. 120-121). Furthermore, it has been argued that in the context of Mumbai, a city that was once known for being diverse and tolerant, the now apparent concern for women's safety is no more

than a front to exclude women from public space (Phadke et al., 2011, p. 11).

Gender thus continues to remain a low priority for urban planners and policymakers. Mostly, gender is considered in planning only in the creation of gender-segregated spaces. This is because gender-based violence is more pronounced where there are no separate sections for women (Mitra-Sarkar & Partheeban, 2009, p. 74). Women themselves are also said to prefer separate travel for these reasons (Duchène, 2011, p. 16; Jagori and UN Women, p. 42). On the other side of the debate, women's groups argue that creating a separate space for women is incapable of addressing "societal attitudes and norms that permit harassment" (ActionAid, 2011, p. 56) which pervade the majority of spaces. Phadke et al. also argue that although such spaces allow women increased access to public space, it "ultimately entrenches gender differences and maintains society's view of women as potential victims" (Harrison, 2012).

According to a policy brief by Institute for Transportation & Development Policy, "urban transport investments are largely gender blind with a limited understanding of the interrelationships between gender and transport inequities." (Shah et al. 2017, p.1) In their report, they gave recommendations on ensuring the urban PTS is not "gender blind". This will require a close examination of four aspects:

- i. Safety
- ii. Comfort
- iii. Convenience
- iv. Affordability

Liisa Horelli, too points out in her study that, "urban agendas still lack gender-awareness concerning the supportive infrastructure of everyday life that enhances the opportunities for both women and men with different backgrounds and orientations to muddle through in the complex daily contexts" (Horelli, 2017, p. 2).

1.7.1 Urban Informality and Insurgent Planning

The 'crisis of the urban space' resulting from globalization and liberalization, necessitates a newer form of organizing urban logic, "a new mode of urban existence or a new way of urban life" (Bayat, 2004). Urban informality hence is an organizing logic that seeks to constantly negotiate or find strategies by which individuals and communities can achieve mobility and claim their rights and

recognition (Kundu, 2019). Rather than a product, it can better be understood as a process, but it is always an intentional one, hence it is also termed as intentional informality.

Insurgent planning, as theorized by Faranak Miraftab, “as those radical planning practices that respond to neoliberal specifics of dominance through inclusion” (Miraftab, 2009, p. 32). It provides a process separate from the state where vulnerable communities can participate in shaping the urban landscape despite their exclusion from formal planning mechanisms (Dean, 2017). These practices are characterized by three important aspects:

- i. It is transgressive in time, place and action
- ii. It is counter-hegemonic:
- iii. It is imaginative

A study by Laura Dern applies this concept in the context of the ladies’ compartment of the Mumbai Locals. She says, “In the absence of useful, friendly public spaces for women, female passengers on the Mumbai Local have created their own networks and rules of belonging that allow a marginalized group of largely low-income women to access both formal paid work, informal livelihoods, and space for domestic labour within the space of the commuter trains. These spaces exist because of the ongoing erasure of women’s experiences and spaces in public spaces by the responsible municipality in an effort to wield greater control over urban development” (Dean, 2017, p. vii)

1.8 Concluding Notes

What I have attempted to do in this chapter is provide a context of the socio-economic and political backdrop of the Mumbai locals, in which the women of this study travel each day to their places of work. Some key conditions that characterize their commute are the increasingly globalized city of Mumbai which constructs circumstances of marginality and intensifies the peripheral location of women, both in terms of their geographical as well as social location.

2.0 Research Methodology

This chapter deals with the theoretical framework, methodology, methods of data collection and analysis that were used to carry out the research study in understanding the experiences of women who regularly travel to Mumbai locals. It is qualitative research and the chapter will elaborate on the methods of sampling, the process of data collection, approaches and process of data analysis, limitations and scope of the study.

2.1 Rationale

As seen from the review of literature, most of the research done on women in public transport tends to be quantitative, with greater emphasis on the impact of infrastructural design, sexual harassment, and its impact on their travel behaviours, work and mobility. The experiences within the local train are mostly studied under the confined space of sexual harassment and experience of safety. Hence, this study attempts to understand and document the everyday experience, inside the Mumbai Locals of women, especially those living in the periphery of the city and commuting to city centres for work. It looks at how women have “quietly and cooperatively repurposed public infrastructure to meet their day-to-day needs” (Dean, 2017). I would like to do so keeping in mind the context of increasing privatization of basic services, the fault lines exposed due to the pandemic, and the peripheral location of the women (both literally and figuratively).

2.2 Research Questions

Some of the questions that the author began with were the following:

1. What does the experience of women inform us about the centrality of the Mumbai locals in the life of women who live in the suburbs? How has it changed over the years, in the context of an increasingly globalized and neo-liberal scenario of the city? What does it entail for women’s agency and well-being?
2. How have the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns impacted their notions of commuting to work in Mumbai locals? Has the pandemic or the lockdown changed their notions of the centrality of the Mumbai locals?
3. Do women from different socio-economic backgrounds experience the commute differently? If yes, how so?
4. What are the factors which necessitate the growing calls for female-only spaces (the ladies’ compartment), and are there other voices which call for the opposite? If yes, what may be the reasons?
5. What are the ways of coping/surviving/navigating through these crowded spaces? Are there systems and strategies which help them do so? If yes, what are they?

2.3 Scope of the Study

The study focuses on women who live in the peripheral areas of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, hence, the regions beyond the Mumbai Suburban district have been chosen. I have limited my study

to the women who commute regularly in the Central Railway (CR) of the Mumbai Suburban Rail Network. Some of the women use the Western and Harbor line for travelling only occasionally, and not regularly. Although many of their experiences of theirs can be generalized to those who travel regularly in the Western or Harbor Line, yet many differences exist.

Furthermore, this study focuses solely on cis-gendered, heterosexual women.

2.4 Theoretical Perspective

2.4.1 Feminist Methodology and Research

Feminist research is essentially seeing gender as “a lens that brings into focus particular questions” (Fox-Keller, 1985, p.6). It implies using women’s experiences as an empirical and theoretical resource (Harding, 1987, p. 6). It is “not.. a mere adding to details; it will not merely widen the canvas but result in a shift of perspective enabling us to see a very different picture” (Narayan, 2004). In addition to this, feminist research approaches consider as its aim to “establish collaborative and non-exploitative relationships.. and to conduct research that is transformative” (Cresswell, 2007, p 26). And this has been key to my study.

Interaction between the researcher and the ‘researched’ has been a subject of much contestation. Interviewing was often only seen as a means of collecting information, and ‘the interviewer is really a tool or an instrument’ (Oakley, 1981). An interviewer is either typified as ‘a combined phonograph and recording system’, where ‘the interviewer must treat the interviewee as an object or data-producing machine’. Or, it is typified as a ‘psychoanalyst’, and ‘the interviewer’s relationship to the interviewee is hierarchical’ (ibid). She criticized this method of interviewing as ‘masculine’, where objectivity, hierarchy, and detachment were valued, while subjectivity, relationships and involvement are considered unnecessary, in fact even an ‘invalid’ method of researching. The interviewer-interviewee relationship was one where the interviewer dominates over the subordinate interviewee, where the interviewer’s extracting of information is more valued than the interviewee’s yielding of information. She considers this relationship inherently exploitative and suggested a feminist understanding to build a non-hierarchical relationship, where the flow of information is not unidirectional, but both the interviewer and the interviewee are equal participants. She narrates her transition to befriending many respondents and how she found it difficult to maintain detachment as suggested by the textbook style of interviewing.

The foundations laid by Ann Oakley on feminist research and feminist ways of interviewing have played a definite role in how I view my respondents, and how I wish to be viewed by the

respondents I interact with. Rather than as a detached researcher, who is merely interested in their data, I need to be able to invest my identity in the relationship. A genuine effort has to be taken to move towards a more meaningful relationship, rather than an exploitative one.

Since my respondents are all female, we may safely presuppose that we may have plenty of shared experiences and hence would be considered an 'insider'. Like most of my respondents, I too live in the suburbs and travel regularly on the Mumbai local trains. On the other hand, it is equally true that differences in age, class, marital status, occupation etc. all can contribute to different power relationships in women interviewing women (Tang, 2002). Essentially, feminist research tries to minimize the power differences between the interviewer and the respondent, even though it agrees that these power dynamics may not be completely eradicated (Maynard, 1994). But many other feminists have questioned the dominant position of the interviewer and consider power to be a fluid concept. I am more in agreement with this. For example, in choosing the respondents, I exercise power, but I cannot make the respondent agree to the interview. In addition to this, choosing the time, place and language in which the interview will take place is also made at the convenience of the respondent, and it inevitably gives more power to the respondent. Hence, the power undergoes ebb and flow at each phase of the research process (Limerick et al, 1996).

2.4.2 Reflexivity

Another key aspect of the feminist methodology is that "researchers need to consciously and systematically include their own roles or positions and assess how they impact their understandings of a woman's life" (Cresswell, 2007, p. 26). Being reflexive is the process where the researcher engages in a critical analysis of one's role and subjective position. Being constantly reminded of the distinction between their relationships as researcher/participant versus that of friend/friend can help in making the relationship more equal and fruitful. It is important to understand that "how we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class and personal politics that we bring to research. All writing is "positioned" and within a stance" (Cresswell, 2007, p. 179).

2.5 Objectives

- To document the 'Mumbai local' experience of women who live in the suburbs and travel regularly for work or study to the city centers
- To discover the centrality of the Mumbai locals in their lives, in the context of their

peripheral location and in light of the pandemic.

- To examine how differences in age, religion, time of travelling, type of compartment etc. influence the travel experience
- To understand the significance of the ladies' compartment which represents a critical space of mobility for female Mumbaikars

2.6 Research Design

As mentioned above, feminist research is essentially about minimizing power differentials and empowering women to share their stories. This, I believe, is best exemplified in qualitative research. As Cresswell says in his book, "We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study." (Cresswell, 2007, p. 40). In addition to this, qualitative research is necessary to understand the setting or context "in which participants in a study address a problem or issue." The context is key in this study.

2.7 Sampling Method

A convenience sampling method was used, where most of the respondents were chosen based on prior acquaintance, and also those who met the sampling criteria. The participants all belonged to the relevant social group, so this convenience sample was also purposive as well as straightforward to generate within the usual limitations brought on by the nationwide lockdowns and other factors. Access negotiations for this thesis were relatively easy because rapport and empathy already existed between us. Additionally, my sampling approach was based on the fact that the themes and the research questions I was exploring were ones we had talked about in the normal course of our acquaintance or friendships. Hence, I knew that they had ample experiences to share about this research topic. This way, I have strived to ensure that this is not at the expense of information and credibility.

2.7.1 Sampling Criteria

The respondents were all residing in the Mumbai suburbs – more specifically, in the Thane district of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. I have confined the study to the Central line (shown in green on the map given below) of the Mumbai suburban network as this was the route which I and the respondents regularly travel in. The Mumbai district's (which is the Central Business District) last station is in Kurla, and the Mumbai Suburban district's final station is in Mulund. Hence, I have

chosen my respondents who live beyond the Mumbai and Mumbai Suburban districts, i.e. in the Thane district, and travel to work or study in the Mumbai/Mumbai Suburban district. Furthermore, I have chosen the participants who work in both formal and informal sectors.

2.7.2 Sample Size

The sample consists of 10 women from an age range of early-twenties to late fifties. All except three are working, while the rest are studying in post-graduate courses. Those who work all do so in the formal sector. All of them belong to middle-class families, and six out of the ten respondents belong to the state of Maharashtra, while the rest are from different states like Kerala, Rajasthan and Haryana.

2.8 Data Collection Methods

For this dissertation, I have primarily employed three ways of collecting information – in-depth interviews, covert non-participatory observation and lived experience. I was involved in non-participatory observation during the early months of the thesis and made notes about what I saw. I later used these learnings in the interview process also. The interviews were conducted from December 2020 to February 2021. The tool of data collection for the in-depth interviews is a semi-structured interview guide. The questions are open-ended, to enable further probing so that the social realities of the women will be understood from their perspectives, keeping the women at the centre of inquiry.

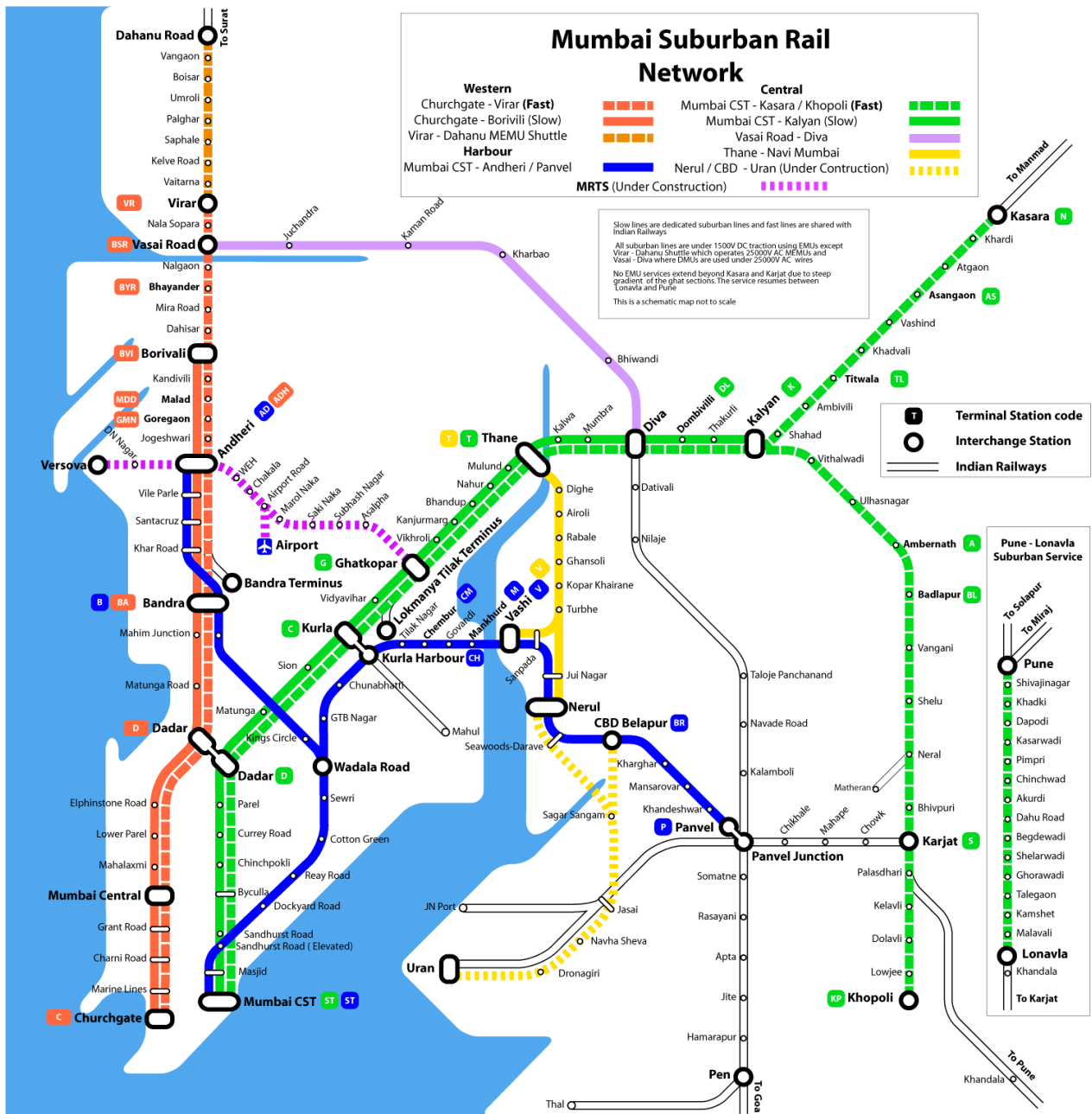


Fig. 1: The Mumbai Suburban Rail Network

2.9 Data Analysis

The data was transcribed. Codes were identified and these codes were reduced to themes by identifying salient themes or patterns. These codes were contextualized in the framework from the literature. Thematic analysis was used for analyzing the data. I have chiefly used the six-step process of conducting thematic analysis as advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006). These six steps are as follows:

- i. Getting familiarized with the data: actively engaging with the data by reading, re-reading and

searching for meaning, patterns, coding themes etc.

- ii. Generating initial codes: identifying interesting aspects that can be used as preliminary code, and recognizing any patterns or themes that are being repeated.
- iii. Searching for themes: sorting, arranging, analyzing the codes and combining them if there are similarities found to form the central themes. In addition to this, sub-themes and sub-sub-themes or miscellaneous themes were also identified.
- iv. Reviewing themes: this step involves the themes that were generated in the previous step to be checked with the coded extracts and the overall data set. A thematic map was also generated at this stage.
- v. Defining, refining and naming themes: this step involves developing an understanding of the meaning of each theme as well as what the overall themes are about (Majumdar, 2019).
- vi. Producing final report: the concluding step involves writing down the final results after analyzing them.

It has to be noted that these six steps can often be iterative, and the order of the steps is often interchanged, repeated or skipped.

2.10 Limitations

1. Researching friends: Since most of my interviews were either with friends or friends of friends, a word needs to be said on the limitations of researching friends. I need to make a distinction between researching friends and developing friendships with my participants. Although there are many advantages of researching friends such as a good level of trust between me and the participant, I would like to present some of the risks associated with it. Since I have known some respondents for more than a decade, there arises an issue of shared knowledge. There are incidents and circumstances of their life that they may have shared with me earlier, and assuming this, they may not mention it during the interview. Or they may not feel like sharing some details in the context of our research, which may be missed out. In the end, I believe that the possible advantage of this approach outweighs these possible risks.
2. Online interviews: due to the lockdowns, only one interview could be conducted in person. The rest were conducted in either a Zoom video call or a phone call. In interviews over digital platforms, I felt often inhibited the respondents from sharing their experiences. Frequent internet connectivity disruptions and other factors also contributed to this feeling.
3. Limited sample size: only ten interviews were conducted, due to reasons like lockdown restrictions, time availability of the potential respondents etc. Also, the sample lacks diversity, there

were no disabled women or women from ST communities. I have also limited my research to cis-gendered, heterosexual women.

4. Interviews were conducted only once: This study could have been more insightful if it was a longitudinal one, which involved interviewing before, during and after the shutting of the train services. The majority of the participants were interviewed after the lockdowns were eased and had some experience travelling after the train services were resumed for all. But some participants were interviewed who had not experienced travel in the re-opened services.

2.11 Ethical Considerations

1. Researching friends often throws up certain ethical concerns. For example, there may be a feeling of betrayal - something they may have felt deeply about in their personal lives must only have been briefly mentioned in my final research paper. What I have tried to do is to communicate thoroughly and explain my role as a researcher. I have aimed to explain that I may or may not use extracts from this particular interview and that although everything they say is valuable, sometimes it is valuable in combination with the rest of the data that I manage to obtain from other participants.

2. Informed consent was taken from all the participants, and they were given the freedom to withdraw or respond according to their wishes.

3. Confidentiality was maintained at all times.

3.0 Analysis

3.1 The Mumbai Local Experience – Resilience Or Resignation?

3.1.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to do two things: one, to understand the experiences of the women who live in the peripheral regions and travel each day for work or study to the city centres, and two, to situate the experiences of women in the larger contexts of the changing urban geography and neo-liberal policies of the state. It also seeks to answer, does ‘going out to work’ necessarily increase women’s well-being and agency? And what does the experience of women inform us about the centrality of the Mumbai locals in the life of women who live in the far suburbs? And how has it changed over the years? Hence, this chapter will look at how the extremely crowded spaces have impacted their life, how they navigate through it, and the help they received.

Most women concur that the commute to work in Mumbai locals is a significant aspect of their lives. Living in the peripheral regions of the city essentially entails spending a significant amount of

their time of the day (up to four hours) inside the Mumbai Locals. This means that the people they meet in Mumbai Locals had as much an influence on their experience of travel as other design elements like comfort, convenience and affordability. Both these aspects will be explored here.

I would like to briefly chart their everyday travel in terms of distance travelled, type of compartment, time of travelling, and if they own a private vehicle, to get a sense of the conditions of their travel. The average distance travelled by them is 49.5 km. But it has to be noted that this is strictly the distance between two stations. This figure does not include the last-mile journey they do from the station to their place of work and residence. It also does not include the complex trip-chain journeys that are characteristic of female mobility patterns. Hence, the actual figure for distance travelled can be much higher than what is given here.

Sr. No.	Time of Travelling (Peak/Non-Peak Hour)	Boarding Station	Alighting Stations	Route Length (km)	Type of Compartment	Private Vehicle Ownership
1.	Both	Dombivli	Mahalaxmi	45	Ladies (general)	No
2.	Peak	Thane	Churchgate	36	1 st class General	No
3.	Peak	Thane	Lower Parel	28	1 st class Ladies	No
4.	Peak	Kalyan	Churchgate	57	Both	No
5.	Peak	Kalyan	CSMT	54	1 st class Ladies	Yes
6.	Both	Kalyan	CSMT	54	Ladies (general)	No
7.	Peak	Ambarnath	Kurla	44	Both	No
8.	Peak	Kalyan	Kanjurmarg	29	Ladies (general)	No
9.	Peak	Kalyan	CSMT	54	Ladies (general)	No
10.	Peak	Kalyan	CSMT	54	1 st class Ladies	No

Table 1: Travel Patterns of the Respondents

3.1.1.1 Super Dense Crush Load

Super dense crush load - that is what the crowd density is categorized as in planning parlance, to describe fourteen to sixteen standing passengers into one square meter of floor space on the Mumbai Locals. While the recommended capacity of a nine-car train is 1,700 people (which is around four

passengers per square meter), during peak hours in Mumbai Locals can see a footfall of up to 4,700 passengers. This leads to a regular contestation of space among the Locals, and at times, it also turns fatal. According to data collated by the Railway Police, around nine people die each day due to falling from trains due to overcrowding⁴. Furthermore, stations at the periphery of MMR, like Kalyan, see one of the highest recorded figures (Saha, 2015). The lack of an alternative mode of transport to travel to the city centre often forces people to opt for risky conditions of travel (as shown in the table, only one among the ten participants owned a private vehicle). This was reflected in many of the interviews with the respondents, where they spoke of boarding a crowded train and having to travel standing on the footboard. One of the respondents related how she felt travelling like that for the first time, *“Once I had my semester exam and the trains were very, very late. And I thought “Aaj toh latak ke jana padega” (I will have to hang from the train), but I was in my first year and I had no experience of hanging from the train and I was very scared. But I got in and after the train started moving I regretted the move instantly. Now I cannot get down also. I was standing on the footboard and I had held that handle but I was completely hanging outside the train. It was another woman who stood in front of me who saved me that day.”*

Notice how quickly things escalate. The high acceleration rate of the EMU trains makes it extremely unsafe to deboard the train once you find yourself standing on the footboard, hanging from the door. Decisions are taken swiftly, and there is absolutely no time for a rethink. Hence, a computerized voice announcement cautions passengers in each compartment against travelling on the footboards. Some respondents found these announcements a mockery of their daily struggles, as it is practically impossible to adhere to it in the peak hours: *“These announcements make it seem as if the government and the Railways actually care for us. They won’t provide better services forcing us to travel on footboards and then have the audacity to preach such cautions.”*

This lack of provision has been reflected in the investments made towards public transport. An IndiaSpend analysis of data showed that “In 65 years, the passenger load on Mumbai’s suburban rail system grew more than eight times, while train capacity grew about three times, revealing how the city’s commuter-rail infrastructure has failed its commuters” (IndiaSpend Team, 2017). Even after repeated reprimands from the Bombay High Court, the situation remains the same. The Elphinstone stampede was one watershed moment when 22 people lost their lives and the shoddy management of

⁴ While this number also includes deaths due to suicides and crossing the tracks, falling out of crammed compartments remained among the major cause of deaths.

this deadly rail network was brought into the limelight.

Besides endangering their lives, these crowded compartments are a source of stress, both physical and emotional, for many commuters, and a majority of women expressed feeling helpless, tired and anxious. When asked if and how the crowds have affected their health, the respondents answered, *“I was very frustrated at a point of time. Sometimes I used to return back home and I would cry that I cannot go ahead with this anymore. It was too much for me because I was also working in the Council and I had my studies and I was very busy. So mentally it was very exhausting.”*

“When I first started to travel by local trains, it was very physically draining for me... my legs used to pain because then pata nhi tha ki (I did not know) you could reserve seats. So, if you don't get a seat, then it's going to affect your legs because you have to stand the whole time – more than an hour. Then it definitely drains you a lot... and otherwise also, like sitting in a local train... and then for three to four hours a day it's physically draining.”

This extract illuminates how taxing the long hours in crowded compartments can be. The increasing crowds have impacted the health of many women both physically and mentally. Sometimes the crowds are so much that they feel suffocated, not able to breathe. One respondent explained how this is particularly a ladies' compartment phenomenon, *“Women literally can't breathe, we are suffocating. There is no space to move, you can literally sleep vertically in that position (laughs). The general compartment also is crowded but they also have bigger compartments. So, men cannot understand that, only women can.”*

Around 20% of the Mumbai Local compartments are reserved for women. But even as more women go out and work these days, the percentage of space reserved has remained the same. I will be exploring the debates around reserved compartments in a future section.

Mumbai Local experience, for many, is incomplete without navigating through the densely crowded compartments during the peak hour. Their first experience remains vivid, particularly for this reason too – the crushing crowds and feeling of utter helplessness. First-timers have it difficult, especially those who have migrated to the city from small towns and villages, *“I had just come from my village in Kerala, and Mumbai was such a big city. I was worried about how to get down, where to get down. I had never travelled in trains much when I was in Kerala, so it was all so new to me. I also did not know the language. I knew English, no Marathi, and a very bit of Hindi.”*

J: Were you alone?

“Yes, only for the first day my uncle showed me the college in Dadar, then he told me to remember everything, and that I will be travelling alone from tomorrow and cannot come to drop you here everyday. I had no friends. And I had to change trains too, since I lived in Mankhurd, in Harbour line, and then take the Central line train. And that too Dadar is very crowded. And I had to find everything on my own.”

Finding everything on your own, and successfully navigating the Mumbai Locals is a sign that you are finally a Mumbaikar. Hence, “Travelling with confidence often marks a rite of passage for those who want to belong to the city” (Phadke et al, 2010).

3.1.1.2 Contestation for Space

These extremely crowded compartments mean that even an inch of space is precious and highly contested. This struggle starts the moment the train starts to slow down on the platforms. The highly experienced travellers jump in at least one to two meters before the train skidded to a halt. They are often rewarded with the ultimate luxury – a window seat. While the rest have to jostle to get inside, and often get pushed, pulled, slapped or kicked in the process. Getting on the train was in itself described as a ‘life-and-death’ struggle of sorts, as these respondents say, *“I board the train at 6:30 pm while returning and it is very crowded. I just barge in, and try to get in in any way possible. And I don't look anywhere. I don't look if I'm hurting someone. I just get in and my only aim is to get a seat.. and within 10 seconds all the seats are filled in.”*

“I have to do maara-maari (fight) just to get inside the compartment...”

This struggle to get inside is majorly for getting a seat - any seat, as a lack of seat, will entail travelling for hours standing, in cramped and extremely uncomfortable conditions. Sometimes, if they are lucky, they do get a seat, which is sometimes only for a few minutes before they need to get down to their destination stations.

“I usually ask someone to give me their seat. Seat-booking karna padta hai (you have to reserve/claim your seat). Even if someone is getting down in Ghatkopar or Kurla, I usually accept the seat because I can sit for at least 2-3 minutes.

“the daily travellers - they know how to get on board in a running train. you know, that decisive moment when you are boarding - you hardly remember anything, because you are panicking and you are nervous and you are only aim is to get a seat - not a 4th seat - if you know what I mean. and yeah... that moment is such that you have to do anything to get in, and just get a seat.”

This extract illustrates how valuable a seat is. Hence, women have an elaborate set of unwritten rules which govern who can stand where and how those who do have a seat can pass it on to others when they get down. It is usually known only by those who have travelled for a considerable period in peak hours. Travelling for several hours necessitates a seat, which is a rarity due to the crowded compartments. This requires many women to 'claim a seat', a practice solely observed in the ladies' compartment. Claiming a seat is the process in which a woman requests another passenger who has got a seat to hand over the seat to them once they alight the train at their station. Women who have a fixed timetable at their place of work form groups so that they can share the seats among themselves, and each person in the group can get a seat. Furthermore, another feature observable only in the ladies' compartment is the presence of a 'fourth seat'. Usually, seats in the Mumbai Locals are designed to seat only three individuals. But the paucity of seats and space allows for a fourth person to be squeezed in at the end of the seat.

Another aspect to note is that fast trains (a phrase used to denote trains that only stop at very select stations and not the speed of the train) are the more crowded ones, and hence require a particular art or skill to navigate it. One respondent commented how it feels like, among all the chaos and mayhem of the crowd, and another remarks how travelling with the Locals is a skill, something to be learnt, something which has a method in it, *"Peak hours are a curse (...) especially in fast trains. The women are hanging from the train - it is unimaginable for me... it is a rebellious thing for me to even stand on the edge of the train, near the door. I know that it feels good when the train is slowing down but when it's fast, it is very scary. and they are constantly shouting 'andar chalo, andar chalo' (get inside), but somehow the space is managed and we get inside."*

"Without experience you cannot get on the fast trains. I would tell them (the newcomers) that please go in the slow trains and learn. So, if you have to go in the fast train, there is a specific method to it. And you have to learn it... either the crowd may push you outside or it may trample you... it is very difficult for someone who is traveling for the first time to travel peacefully in the fast trains."

Those who are newcomers and are not privy to these rules often find themselves targets of frustrations and anger from other travellers, as they often disrupt this carefully balanced and tenuous equilibrium within the ladies' compartment. Talking about her first experience of travelling with the Locals, a respondent said, *"I was travelling with my mother and aunt. And none of us were expecting it to be so crowded. It was terrible. Also, we did not know the things that have to be learnt when one is travelling in the train. And we were standing near the door, but when others learnt that we were*

travelling to CST, which was the last station, they shouted at us to move inside. They were rude to us, but now I understand that one would be angry, but at that time I knew nothing. But yes, that experience was eye-opening as to what to expect when I will be travelling regularly.”

But it was interesting to note that it was the older respondents who have been regularly travelling for decades who found the harrowing conditions more bearable. One of them, while talking about the contestation for space and the conflicts it provokes, observed how the younger travellers get aggravated quickly, *“Fights have increased in number after the young generation started coming. They get angry very quickly, very hot-tempered. If they don't get a seat quickly, they become irritated. Then they get angry if we ask them to move. Then hitting, pulling hairs... I have seen it so many times. Earlier these fights did not happen much. The older women are more mature and fight less.”*

Dean (2017), in her observation, noted that such inter-generational disputes “are densely packed with multiple meanings beyond the general discomfort of riding such crowded trains” (Dean, 2017, p. 58). They also reveal concerns about the appropriateness of their clothing or their demeanour towards the older co-passengers. Often, these conflicts are bilingual, where the younger commuter speaks in English, and the older woman speaks in Marathi or Hindi. But another respondent had another reason to tell, *“When I am travelling, I get to hear women talking about how they did all the housework. All of them are talking about this and some of them are so frustrated. Which is why I feel that there are more fights in the ladies compartment. There are rarely any fights in the general compartment. And there is this perception that women are always fighting, but they don't look at the reason.”*

3.1.1.3 Feeling Helpless, Finding Help

Where governments and states fail, it is usually the people and fellow passengers who step up to help each other navigate these spaces. Almost all of the respondents had an incident to narrate where they were generously helped by strangers within the Locals. One of them narrated how she was helped when she was pregnant- *“This happened about 16-17 years ago. I was pregnant with my first child, about 4-5 months. The train was crowded, and there was no place to sit. And I felt faint and wanted to vomit. At that time, a woman came and helped. She held me and made me sit at a place and bought tea for me. She waited until I felt better.*

J: Have you met after that?

“Yes, I still see her. I always remember the incident when I see her. I saw her yesterday too. But she doesn't recognize me. I always think about going to her and thanking her again, but I have never done that till now. It was an unforgettable experience for me.”

Unexpected generosity from strangers is often called the quintessential Mumbai experience. In the absence of better public services, citizens hence form support systems, strategies and other ways of navigating these spaces. The ladies' compartment, in many ways, exemplifies this phenomenon and will be further explored in the following sections.

Besides generous co-passengers, an app called 'm-indicator' also invites ample credit for making life easier for the people of Mumbai. A free application, it provides information on the train timings and even the current location of each train service of the entire Mumbai Suburban Rail Network⁵. An interesting feature of the app is that it allows for an in-app train chat service, which is immensely helpful to get information from other users of the service. A respondent summarized the efficacy of the app in these words, *“The m-indicator app is very helpful. M-indicator nahi hai toh kuch nhi chalega (nothing will work without it).”*

3.1.1.4 Acceptance and Glorification of Struggle

For most women, the daily struggle has now become an 'aadat', a habit. After years of travelling in the same harrowing conditions, many now feel that this is unchangeable and nothing can be done about it. After recounting what she had suffered due to the crowds on the train, two respondents said how they have now gotten used to the kicks, slaps and other injuries, *“This is very normal, and I have gotten used to it.”*

“There are many problems with the locals but it is a machine and nothing can be done about it. It has become a habit, so I don't feel it is difficult.”

“I think I have kind of built a relationship with the locals. Eventually you grow to like it. I think, however much you hate it, you grow to like it. Like right now I miss traveling by the train. I miss the crowds. I miss the struggle, you know, so I miss all of that right now.”

This acceptance of struggle is partly due to the reason that there are no alternatives to the Mumbai Locals. As Phadke et al (2011) describe in their book, “Despite the many hardships attendant to

⁵ It also provides details of all the major transport services, including buses, express trains, monorail, metros, cabs, autos, ferries and also sections for locating a police station, exploring Mumbai and job notifications.

commuting in this city, there is certain insouciance among commuters in Mumbai, both women and men, that has its roots variedly in optimism, resignation, lack of choice and desensitization.” This was exemplified in this extract by a respondent who was comparing the Mumbai Locals with that of Pune’s, *“People in Mumbai are accustomed to it and know how to navigate through. It would be apt to say we, Mumbaikars, have sort of developed a sixth sense - we know where to stand, we know how to pass someone by, we know when to board, how to board and how to alight no matter the crowd and we don't even complain. I cannot say the same for Pune'kars.”* This foregrounds the centrality of the Mumbai Locals in their lives, albeit a fraught one.

3.1.1.5 Irreplaceability of the Locals

Part of the reason for such wide acceptance of the harrowing conditions is that Locals allow women the opportunity to build relationships and socialize that few other modes of transport can, as this respondent said, *“I don't think that anything can replace the local trains and even if it is replaced, it could be the metros... but I would still prefer the locals, even if the metro comes or even if the aeroplane comes (laughs), but I would still go for locals because the time pass that happens, the friends you meet and the people you meet. Well, that is fun, and for all that the locals and the trains are the best. Some things you need the old... old is better.”*

Some of the respondents also agreed that they would not have chosen the place of work or study if not for the fast, affordable and convenient travel in the Locals. When comparing the Locals with the Mumbai Metro, a respondent agreed that travelling in the Metro can be a bit intimidating and confusing, besides the affordability concerns, *“Metros are very expensive. Also, this thing about keeping safe that little coin is very difficult. I have a lot of tension about that. It is very difficult for someone who is new and traveling in the metros, because if someone has come from the village, and when he buys a ticket, he is given a coin. He will be very confused about what to do with it. So, if we look around, some people have a card, some people have a coin, some people are putting it inside. Some people are getting it back... It is confusing”*

Besides this, the Metros has an absence of vendors inside its compartments, who are a ubiquitous presence among the Locals. This takes away from the whole environment of the quintessential Mumbai experience – the crowd and the noise. *“I have not seen any vegetable vendors or other people who do business in the metros and people are very quiet in the metro, and it is not ‘happening’. I get bored in the metro.”*

Interestingly, another respondent emphasized the irreplaceability of the Locals by citing the growth trajectory of the city, and the way the Metros are being haphazardly inserted into the fabric of the city, *“Metro is everywhere these days but the fact is, the metro cannot replace the local trains. Those who come from outside, they also say that the Locals is the best thing, even if they have travelled in the metro. In the locals everything is set and in place, the connectivity and everything. In Mumbai the city was built around the local trains, but metro is being inserted into the city. If you go to the Fort area near CST, the place has been completely ransacked due to the Metro works.”*

“People can be accommodated to increase the capacity of the locals, but people won't do that for metros. Metros will have to adjust in the city. The Locals has importance in our lives.”

3.1.1.6 Living in the Periphery

All the participants of this thesis currently reside in the far suburbs, but that was not the case a decade or two ago. Six out of the ten respondents that I talked to have shifted to their current places of residence from the city centres. As Singh (2010) notes in his research, increasing residential costs in the city have pushed more people into “dormitory towns”. That is, due to the unavailability of jobs in the suburbs, most residents of these satellite towns travel to the city for work each day and return only to rest. Living in the peripheral region also means that their travel times have increased by a significant measure, and this they try to make the most of. One of the respondents said, *“I reach home late at night, around 11 pm or midnight, and I have to leave the next day at 4am. I hardly sleep for 2-3 hours. So whatever sleep I get in the train, I try to utilize it properly, and I feel fresh after a nap in the train.”*

Women make complex choices and trade-offs between the long hours spent on the train and a relaxing environment at home. Sometimes, it is the comfort of home which acts as an encouragement to brave the crowds and the utter helplessness that characterizes their everyday commute, as these respondents say, *“Where I currently live can be called a ‘gaon’, a rural area. It is much different from where I lived earlier. In the city everything was nearby - jobs, good schools and colleges etc. But after coming back home after work or some other travel, I cannot relax peacefully. Over there, there is a constant noise of vehicles, hawkers, children playing. I lived in a chawl, which is a loud place with people coming and going all the time. So even if I have to struggle in the train, at least after coming home I can enjoy peace.”*

“I think of the comfort and warmth of home and my bed that keeps me on my feet. I make up my mind that crowded trains are inevitable in the city of Mumbai and that I have to catch the next train

come what may.”

Urban geographers and planners often conceptualized where residential locations ought to be situated based on the assumption that the household's one wage-earner (male) made a single-purpose journey to work and back. This assumption completely ignores the travel patterns of women who are supposed to be cloistered at home in suburban domestic spaces. While “the isolation of domestic spaces away from the city centre was beneficial for men (who commuted into the city for work and sought a home that would be a haven from the disorder of the city), that same isolated denied their wives and daughters access to jobs, resources, and social ties” (Dean, 2017, p. 18). But as more and more women enter the labour force and are made to manage both domestic and work responsibilities, it becomes harder to envision the home as a haven for women as it is envisioned for men.

“But if you look at the women who travel in the local trains, I have heard this many times, the women complain that they have to wake up at 5am do all of the house chores, and then the husband's tiffin, and then take care of the in-laws, getting up at five in the morning. Then they have to look after the kid and pack their tiffin. And then they travel in the trains. So they don't even get time to sleep. So, it is very hectic. And for some It is okay. But what I feel is that if they are also doing the housework, then they should get paid more. It is very unfair, the men also travel, but they don't have the pressure to cook and clean, etc. and take care of the kids. And then to get back home and do that all over again. This is beyond me.”

3.1.2 Travelling to Work During Disasters

Although disaster affects people everywhere, the magnitude of that impact is not uniform, in other words, although disasters are gender-neutral, their impact is not necessarily so. Men and women, and boys and girls experience disasters differently. For example, disasters increase the already high care burden that women bear. Gender-based violence also hits a peak during such times. Women's livelihoods, education, health etc. are more severely affected than those of men. Hence, as a UNDRR video put it, disasters can often be sexist. Talking about the everyday commute of women who live in the far suburbs, many respondents narrated their experience of missing out on college classes, *“I could not stay back for long hours as my friends used to. And especially during the rainy season it was a problem as I missed my classes for many days because the trains were all stopped. And most of the college fests happened during that time, so I miss out on all that fun.”*

“So travelling becomes difficult especially during the rainy season. I still get scared whenever the rainy season approaches. So, in the floods that happened during 2005 we were stuck inside the train for a whole night, but people have helped us to get food and all. I have been stuck many times at different places during the rainy season due to floods. Once I had to spend a night in a hotel with some strangers. So if it is raining heavily, I leave the office early.”

3.1.2.1 COVID Pandemic

The irreplaceability of the Mumbai Locals was particularly evident during the COVID pandemic times when it forced a suspension of the Mumbai Locals, a rare event in the history of the city. Those who worked in the essential services and lived in the peripheral areas of the city had to face the brunt. This negative impact was disproportionately borne by women who have lower levels of private vehicle ownership or less income to spend on commuting in private buses. A respondent who works in a public sector bank and had taken maternity leave before the pandemic started, said, *“Spread of pandemic COVID-19 and the subsequent shutting down of Mumbai Locals has made travelling to work difficult. Soon, I have to rejoin my branch which is in Masjid and the thought of travelling during these times raises a lot of uncertainty and gives me chills.”*

Another respondent, who had travelled in the Locals after it had resumed service spoke about how the crowd has almost gone to normal because of the lack of alternatives, and how the commute has become even more strenuous, *“It will go back to normal in the nick of time. It will just happen. People don't have any other choice. They don't have any other option; they have to travel for work. It's already so congested, it's hard to breathe. I mean with the mask and all it gets a bit more difficult even though I know masks do not affect breathing. But I don't know who would prefer that... who would prefer to travel during such a condition.”*

Some respondents also recounted missing the social use of the ladies' compartment, *“I do miss some friends, the girls that I used to travel with every day and meet every day. I do miss them. So whenever we talk we always say how we used to travel every day and have fun. And now we are sitting at home and it has become such a boring life.”*

While some had the opportunity of working from home or getting a paid leave, many others lost their jobs. A respondent who was nearing her retirement decided to opt for a Voluntary Retirement Scheme from her government job. The lack of an alternate reliable transport service meant that many employers were reluctant to hire women who lived in the peripheral areas, as there was no surety

that they would be able to come to work after being hired. *“During the lockdown, many people were hesitant to hire me, as they said that the lockdowns may begin any time, and then you won't be able to travel from so long. So, my job hinges on this efficient local train. If it is not working, it would not be possible for me to work so far.*

She had lost her work just before the pandemic struck. She looked for work near her place of residence, but there were not many opportunities there. Being the sole earner for her family, she was worried about paying the mortgages and paying her children's fees. She said, *“If the lockdown is implemented again with the same strictness as before, so many people would starve to death. People are ready to risk getting Covid because by sitting at home, they will remain hungry.”*

She finally got a job in February 2021, after more than a year of remaining unemployed when things were opening up and then lost the job again in April during the second wave of COVID.

3.1.3 Conclusion

I would like to conclude this section with what one of my respondents said in a lengthy monologue towards the end of our interview. Looking back at her thirty-six-year work and travel in Mumbai Locals, she says, *“If a person has lived in Mumbai and travelled in the Locals regularly, they would be strong even if they have to go to any place in the world. That is a very special thing about Mumbai locals. Since I have travelled so much, you can take me to any place, and I will be strong and confident. That is why I can never forget the Mumbai local trains. It is one of the greatest experiences in life. If we have struggled so much and travelled in these local trains, then everywhere else seems very easy. Nothing can be compared to the struggle that we went through. So, if I compare with where I'm staying now, in New York, the women don't have to worry about anything. They do not have to cook - they usually buy things to eat. And then they go in their own car and come back. So, it is very comfortable for them. But women in Mumbai, struggle so much. For example, I leave from my home and take a bus or an auto to Thane Station, and then take the stairs, cross the platform and get in the Locals... And then getting down at Dadar... And then cross the bridge and change the line. Go to the Western line and get another local train for Parel. Getting down at Parel, and from there I have to walk for 15 minutes to reach my office. So, we are struggling so much... Taking care of our kids and other stuff. But I am very satisfied with my life. Because I struggled... and without struggle you cannot live. And after all this struggle when you come back home, you get so tired... very tired. In my youth, it was not a big problem. But as I grew older, I grew weak and some difficulties comes with age and weakness. Otherwise, I don't have any problem. I*

have traveled all 365 days each year. My whole life was spent in the locals. After all that is said and done, it has been a great experience.”

This extract highlights the complexity of the question of women’s work and mobility in the context of the peripheral location of women who live in the suburbs. Bearing the double burden of home and work, it becomes harder to hypothesize that women’s work and mobility necessarily increase women’s well-being and agency. Hence, as Koggel (2003, p.179) says towards the end of her essay, “Informed discussion of development processes and policies must include accounts of global forces of power and their intersection with and utilization of local systems of oppression. These factors are particularly evident in the area of women’s work and have a direct impact on women’s freedom and agency in this and other domains. Taking these factors into account expands the discussion of freedom in Development as Freedom and identifies further barriers to women’s freedom and agency in addition to those that Sen highlights.”

3.2 The Gatekeepers

3.2.1 Introduction

Entry into the train compartments are often mediated through unofficial gatekeepers for each compartment. These rules of entry are not based on official laws or who has a ticket, but unspoken notions of who can belong in a particular compartment. There exists a different set of rules of gatekeeping for each compartment, based on class, caste, religion and gender. Gatekeeping is a phenomenon that is not restricted to only the ladies’ compartment but is observed in the general first-class compartments too. While gatekeeping in the general compartment will be explored in the context of gender segregation in a future section, I would like to explore here what the ‘unbelonger’ identity is based upon in the context of entry into the first-class compartments.

3.2.1.1 First-Class Compartments

The Mumbai Locals are largely affordable and uniform in their service provision for all its users, yet, those who are ready to cough up more can gain entry into compartments that are called first-class. As mentioned before, there is no enhanced travel experience or service provision for these compartments, the price of a first-class ticket is meant to discourage overcrowding in these cars (Dean, 2017). But in recent times, even this advantage is lost, as even first-class compartments see crowds as much as the general compartments. Hence, I asked one of my respondents who regularly travel in the first-class compartment what justifies their paying such a high price for the

same travel experience, and she had the following to say, *“Difference is in the crowd. So if you are thinking about the volume of the crowds, there is not much difference between the crowd in the first and the second compartment. But the type of crowd is different in the first-class ladies and the ladies compartment. So in the first-class compartment, there is peace, there is no fighting and you can travel in peace. There is no abusing and muttering and this happens more in the second-class compartment. So that is the reason I prefer first class because I want peace when I'm travelling, I'm either reading books, or I'm doing my studying so I want some quiet. Here people don't mind each other's business.”*

Here, we can observe a process of othering, of identifying and defining a ‘type of crowd.’ The first-class crowd likes to travel in peace, to read books, it prefers minding their own business, while the ‘second class’ compartment is a space of mayhem and conflict. Those who travel in the second class also agree with some of the claims, but they have a different take on it, as this respondent who prefers to travel in the second class ladies’ compartment says, *“It is a very boring dibba (compartment), no masti, no fun. People just sit and go and come back. In the second class compartment there is masti (fun). And you can also get to see fights (laughs) there are always fights in the train. because in the first class, very high-class people who are business persons and work in large companies, they are the ones who travel in the first class. Those who want to travel comfortably are the ones who travel and take the first-class tickets.”*

She sees the first-class compartment as lacking in ‘fun’ and defines the conflicts that arise in the second-class compartment as a completely natural process, in fact, even as a form of entertainment. She further identifies them as ‘high-class’ people, those who work in large companies. Interestingly, some regular commuters in the first-class compartments also counteract the claim that the first-class compartment is a model of serenity, and said, *“The first-class women do a lot of natak and drama. there are a lot of fights in the first last compartment also, it is just that they fight and cuss in English.”*

This process of othering easily makes way for gatekeeping tendencies, and this makes the first-class compartment a highly regulated place where those who do not seem to fit the appearance of upper-class, upper-caste, Hindu is often asked to show their ticket by a first-class compartment traveller who fits these criteria. What is observed is that the first-class compartment ticket becomes a proxy for an upper-class identity while a non-Hindu or a Dalit identity is assumed to be someone who cannot afford a first-class compartment ticket, and hence disallowed from entry into the

compartment. Phadke et al (2011) note, “In Mumbai today, the unbelongers are the poor... the Dalits and other lower castes whose presence is barely acknowledged, except grudgingly, when they take to the streets during Ambedkar Jayanti; and the Muslims, who are increasingly stereotyped as disagreeable outsiders, criminals and potential terrorists.” I would first like to discuss the non-Hindu identity and then also talk briefly about Dalit and transgender identities.

Muslim identity generates particular tension for many Mumbaikars. Many scholars have identified the increasing right-wing extremist tendencies which culminated in the 1992-93 riots as one of the defining points in the history of Mumbai. Muslims were now seen as traitors and terrorists, as “pariah, increasingly marginalized from the mainstream” (ibid). Appadurai (2000) has written about how it led to a process of ‘urban cleansing’ and the removal of Muslim businesses and homes, “to depopulate Muslim flats and neighbourhoods and to destroy Muslim bodies and properties” Even close to three decades later, the city still bears the scars of those riots, and Muslims are systematically denied access in the public sphere. A respondent describes how this is played out in the Mumbai Locals, and the first-class compartment specifically. She said, *“I and my two friends had a first-class ticket and while coming back, we entered the first-class compartment. And we were wearing hijab and niqab. And when we entered, a lady said “this is first class...” She probably thought we did not know. I don't know what her intention was. But I didn't care because I'm very much used to it. So my friend said, “Yes, we know.” But the woman said, “but there is a fine, you know?”, we had to emphasize that we have the first-class ticket. And it was a point when all our moods went down. Because that was not the first time obviously but you know, it happens a lot of times.”*

This subtle questioning, which seems completely harmless, even kindly to some, takes on a different significance when you note that it was firstly, not asked by a ticket-checker, and secondly, asked only to specific commuters, in this case, a group of Muslim girls. This seemingly friendly stereotyping does not stop only at the gate and continues till the time they disembark. One of them narrated an incident that happened to her once, *“I wear a niqab and a hijab. And many people even in fast trains, they ask me “Oh, you are getting down at Mumbra? Give me your seat.” (laughs) I mean, it is a fast train. It doesn't even stop at Mumbra and this is not just once. But people assume because of the stereotype maybe that I will get down at Mumbra...”*

Mumbra is a typical ghetto town, and also India's largest one. The town finds its origins in the

'92-93 riots when thousands of Muslims fled the city and settled in its outskirts. It is often assumed, as the respondent narrated, that Muslims will be living in this, and only this space. This stereotyping often goes simultaneously with outright discrimination, *“Even if you just sit next to each other. So your arm touches someone... And I had a lot of experience where they would just not appreciate my arm touching them even slightly. They would say, “what is this? sit properly” And I would say “okay, sorry.” And then they stare at you... And these are women who have saris pinned up to the point and they don't even have a single crease on their clothes. So what can you really say? And I don't think I have it in me to rebel against them or talk back at them. So I just listen and let it affect me, I guess... because it does affect a person. If someone says “Don't touch me”, you know, that has happened many times. In the general class, people are more adjustable.”*

Notice how she mentions the clothes of her co-passengers. The first-class ticket holder's identity is in part identified with impeccable attire and branded clothes. Anyone who deviates from that, in this case wearing a hijab and niqab, hence is an outcast. She further talked about how it affected her, the state of constant fear, and how she is disallowed to do what others have the freedom to do. It happens in mostly subtle, but sometimes even explicit ways, *“My mother has always told me not to talk about politics, or anything, in public. Because you never know. Because I wear my identity. You don't have to talk to me to know which religion I belong to. Even if you see me in a hijab and niqab, you know that I'm a Muslim, right? So, my mother always told me to be careful around people and not to tell, because you don't know when... even if what you say is not offensive, you, you don't want to offend people. Even my mother never used to give me meat, or something when I'm in train, or having my tiffin in train, because... because people are getting lynched, Muslims are getting lynched.”*

“This has disheartened me a bit that whenever their temples come, they shout and they chant but at my home my mother says I should not even speak about my own religion in public. Because even if you think you are safe, you are not... because you don't know how someone will take it... you never know...”

The ‘unbelongers’ are not restricted to the non-Hindu identity. Caste, though it seems invisible, also is played out, especially during Ambedkar Jayanti or the Mahaparinirvan Diwas⁶. Phadke et al (2011) talk about how “Transgender people and lesbian women who dress ambiguously face

⁶December 6, the death anniversary of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is celebrated as Mahaparinirvan Diwas and lakhs of his followers, mostly Dalit and Buddhists travel to either the Chaityabhoomi in Dadar or the Global Vipassana Pagoda in Gorai to pay homage.

reactions ranging from confusion to hostility.” But it also seems to be changing, as many respondents said that they have no issues in opening up the ladies’ compartment for transgender persons also, *“I personally don't find any issues with trans women in women's compartment because they identify as women too, so I believe it's their compartment too. Just like us they also have all the rights to travel in any compartment as they wish too. I have noticed people not treating them well, feeling endangered and asking them to get down from the women's compartment but I have never felt this way for them. They're human too and deserve to be treated like one.”*

But some within the first class compartment rebel against such gatekeeping. One of the respondents questioned the legitimacy of using appearance as a way of identifying first-class commuters. She compared the process to the politics of exclusion and discrimination in the CAA-NRC Act. *“They easily identify someone who is not a first class person. I mean, I don't know how they understand that. “You don't look rich.” It is very irritating. What is meant by looking rich? I do not know how they identify. But they ask “show us your tickets”. But why would they show you their tickets? Are you the ticket collector? And when they refused to show it, they say that “You don't have it. That is why you're not showing it.” And when they ask you, “show yours first”, they say, “why would we show it?” It's wrong. It's like CAA-NRC thing. Like kaagaz dikhao (show the papers). Otherwise get out from here. Sometimes they also call the ticket checker and tell them that “who is it that they have come inside our compartment”. It gets irritating. So, if we really think, the second class is better.”*

3.3 The Ladies Compartment

3.3.1 Introduction

The ladies’ compartment remains a critical space of mobility for the majority of women who travel regularly. It is a unique space, with innovative systems and rules that have evolved over the years that help women navigate the public transportation system. The Mumbai Locals were not always gender-segregated and Dean (2017) notes how it was resisted by some female passengers when the ladies’ compartments were first introduced. Many women felt it to be a move towards restricting women to a marginal space. However, many women will admit that it is the gender-segregated space that primarily allows them to access public transport. This takes on particular urgency for women who live in the far suburbs and have no other means of transport to go to work. Safety is the utmost concern for most of them, as the threat of sexual harassment is perceived more in crowded spaces, where a perpetrator can easily slip away anonymously. In 1982, many women’s rights groups successfully organized a campaign to reserve compartments for women for all twenty-four hours

(Phadke et al, 2011). The literature review conceptualized the need for gender-segregated spaces on the grounds of safety. But the interviews with the respondents showed that their need for female-only spaces is much more than that. What I would like to particularly explore in this section is how their preference for gender-segregated spaces goes beyond just safety concerns, although this was also one of their major concerns. I will briefly review the debate over gender-segregated spaces and safety, and return to how women use and perceive this space.

3.3.2 Gender Segregation

All, except two respondents, felt that gender-segregated spaces are a must, as it not just feels more secure, but it allows them to engage in activities which they are otherwise unable to do if there were no female-only spaces. (such as social, domestic and livelihood uses which would be further explained in the next section – Insurgent planning within the ladies’ compartment). Although none of the women said explicitly that they had been harassed by the Locals, there was always a perceived or an imagined threat. Their perception of threat was in relation to the type of the compartment – that is, women felt somewhat at ease in travelling in the first-class general compartment, but not the second-class compartments. The respondent who was an exception to travelling regularly in the ladies’ compartment also chose to travel only in the first-class general compartment. While discussing this perceived threat, she had this to say, *“But not every man is bad, no? you can’t tell that. You have to learn to be comfortable with them. Men are everywhere, and if we are not comfortable with them, then how are we going to survive? There is no other option.”*

Furthermore, the respondents were more open to using the general compartments only if they were accompanied by a male relative or companion, but that too only if it is a non-peak hour. Often, entry into the general compartment for women is based on the fact whether she has a male companion with her or not. A woman who travels alone in the general compartment is often met with non-verbal, and sometimes verbal cues of disapproval. Some respondents narrated that they were asked to board the ladies’ compartment, which is reserved for them, and not take space and seats away from men in the general compartment. *“When we are travelling alone, we do get stares. They show their disapproval... it is visible in their face. They don't want us here but they haven't said anything. They say “tch”, they show a disappointed face. So yeah, that happens. But nobody has actually confronted us. “You shouldn't be here and you should be there.”*

“This usually happens, they ask me that if you don't have a boy with you then why are you coming in the general compartment? Why are you coming alone? They say that this is not yours, this is ours. I

have seen a lot of fights because of this.”

After 11 pm, the train becomes gender-neutral in the sense that a significant portion of women's compartments are turned into the general compartment, and men can now enter the women's compartment. This is probably done with the notion that very few women are expected to travel so late at night, and hence some of the crowd in the general compartment can be redirected into the women's compartment (as more men are expected to be out at night).

But there can be a more nuanced reading of this move. As Dean (2017, p. 31) says, “these cutbacks work to reinforce notions of appropriate time and place for women and suggest that women ought not to be riding the train at night without a male escort,” and this was also pointed out by a respondent, *“At night, there are so few women, so to make sure that a woman is not alone, men are allowed to travel in the ladies compartment. And if something wrong happens to you, it is your responsibility. You will get questions like, what are you doing so late at night alone? You should have been at home by this time.*

Travelling in the peak hour in the general compartment, they said, is a dangerous affair. They felt that making the whole train gender-neutral will not promote women's safety, instead, it will end up alienating women from the few seats which they are getting now, *“I don't think that removing the women's compartment will increase women's safety because the number of women who travel is very less compared to the number of men who travel... because men know how to jump and run and get inside the train. So, if that happens and all the compartments become general, then women will not be able to get the few seats that they are getting now. I feel that we will be getting less seats.”*

She further argued that instead of making the whole train gender-neutral, what should be encouraged is increased access to more women in the general compartments. This will ensure that those who are uncomfortable can continue travelling in the ladies' compartment. But this, as we will see, is impractical, said the two who were against gender segregation.

There were only two respondents who felt that keeping gender-segregated spaces is limiting for women, that while it makes the ladies' compartment safe for women, in the process, it leads to the general compartments relatively more unsafe for women. One of the respondents used this case to argue for de-segregated spaces. She said, *“What I feel is that by giving us a women's compartment, instead of giving us more space and comfort, they are taking away our space. If they keep a women's and a general compartment, women will naturally travel in the women's compartment. While the*

other group will feel that the rest is theirs.” If there is no women’s compartment, there will be more women in all compartments, and they can still feel safe.”

This group loyalty, or as one respondent described it ‘your tribe’, will naturally make women opt for the ladies’ compartment and men will use the rest, and when there are few women, these compartments will seem relatively unsafe. Hence, as long as the women’s compartment exists, the rest of the compartments will remain unsafe for women who use the general compartment. They further explained that gender-segregated spaces strip the gender-neutral nature of the general compartments, which eventually gets termed as ‘gents compartment’. This keeps many women from entering them, even though they are provided for all genders. During one of my interviews, I asked a respondent if she uses the general compartment, and she corrected me by saying that it is the gent’s compartment, as only men travel in it, and women do travel, but only at their own risk. Another respondent also brought out this contradiction between “formal equality or substantive equality, that is, the difference between all people may get on to the train and all people actually get on the train” (Phadke et al, 2011, p. 74). She said, *“I was naive back then. So, I did not know that. I thought that just like in the ladies’ compartment, men cannot accompany them. I thought that in the general compartment, women cannot accompany men. but I later realized that it’s the general compartment. People say this, but I don’t think it is. I have never seen a woman travel alone in the general compartment in the peak hours. Because it is so crowded.”*

3.3.3 Insurgent Planning in the Ladies’ Compartment

Surviving through these crowded spaces require women to collaboratively create systems and strategies where they can rely on one another to navigate these spaces. These unique strategies can be divided into three: social uses, domestic uses and livelihood uses⁷ of the ladies’ compartment. I will briefly explain each of these in the following paragraphs.

i. Domestic uses: Spending more than four or five hours only in commute essentially means that women are left with very little time to do housework after reaching back home from work. But this does not mean that they are exempted from doing housework, as the gendered division of labour still expects women to do the household chores. In this sense, travel and time poverty are interestingly blended together. Time poverty refers to a situation in which individuals, particularly women, experience a lack of time due to an overwhelming burden of responsibilities and

⁷This classification has been adapted from Dean (2017)’s thesis, in which she conducted a participant observation of the phenomena.

obligations, both in paid work and unpaid domestic work. "Beliefs about women's proper sphere and the devaluation of their activity in the home, entrenched in this region's cultural practices, are not easily eliminated when women are allowed to 'work'" (Koggel, 2003). This implies that women are required to find increasingly creative ways to do these tasks, and the ladies' compartment gives them ample space to do these duties. The ladies' compartment hence fulfils the requirement of space where they can prepare their meals, shop for vegetables, fruits, kitchen implements, etc, share recipes for meals or watch them on YouTube and apply and buy make-up products.

"Ab aadat pad gayi train mein travel karne ki (Now it has become a habit). Local train for me... Mujhe sabse comfortable yahi lagta hai (I find it the most comfortable). In local train can travel any time. That is my favourite thing. I can be comfortable and I can do anything that I want to And no one will have a problem with it. I can comb my hair on the local train.. I can do my makeup inside the local trains. I can eat, sleep.. I can do anything. Utna easy nahin hai ye dusri jagah per karna. Voh freedom jaisa feel hota Hai. People don't care what you are doing - you are on your own."

The 'interiority' of women's lives/reality is maintained even in public transit. Hence, the ladies' compartment becomes a public 'inner courtyard' of sorts. A public space, but one which lets them unwind and relax from the prying gaze of men. Many respondents commented on how this space feels like family, or home, something they did not feel in the general compartment, *"See, we all feel safe with our family. We have a compartment that is reserved for ladies, you think that you are with your tribe... like.. it's your group. That safety is another thing. Like... ghar jaisa lagta hai na (it feels like your home, right?).. agar aap train me dekho.. toh ladies compartment apko ghar jaisa lagega... gents compartment nahi lagega.. (if we see in the train, the ladies compartment feels like home, but the gents compartment does not), because that's your tribe."*

Furthermore, there exists an acute dearth of public washrooms, changing rooms etc. and space to breastfeed their children in the city for women. This often warrants the need for a ladies' compartment, where women can do so in privacy. Here, we find the respondent justifying the need for a gender-segregated compartment by pointing out that women adjust their sarees, feed their babies etc. inside the ladies' compartment. These are some activities which they won't be able to do if men were present as they need their privacy.

"Some women who travel from far away like Asangaon or Titwala and go to the Mumbai city, what they do is that they sleep or lie down on the seat, and that they cannot do in front of the men, right? Also, they adjust their sarees, or comb their hair, and all these they cannot do in front of men. They

will become conscious of it, that they are in front of men, and how will they do it then? So the ladies compartment affords this privacy to adjust their sarees and clothes.”

ii. Social Uses: For many women in Mumbai, the ladies' compartment represents so much more than just mobility, it is a space where they can do time-pass. The time spent with other women on the train becomes an increasingly important time for women commuters to engage in leisure time or to socialize with their ‘train friends’. The activities hence include reading a book or watching movies and soap operas, listening to music, or even chanting bhajans or reading holy books. The fact that a long commute leaves them with no time for leisure after reaching home, they make use of this time to refresh themselves. A respondent describes how she spends her time when she is travelling to work, and another describes how it feels not meeting them for a day, *“But when I am travelling with my friends, we never look at the phone. We are talking and joking, and buying things. Sometimes we also eat our breakfast together on the train, and share what we have brought. There’s never a dull moment.”*

“If there are some friends who are together with you, maybe for just masti (fun), then it is okay. But when they go, then you feel lonely and you don't feel like going to the office. I feel like going back home some days. So it is according to mood. I don't feel like traveling every day.”

An interesting aspect that was observed by the older respondents was that women now spent fewer hours socializing with other women and that they were now engrossed in their smartphones. *“When there were no phones, we used to talk more. About new things, new recipes to cook. No one talks now. Maybe a bit in the beginning, but then they start checking their phones again.”*

Travelling with your friend’s group also has other benefits, women who have a fixed timetable at their place of work form groups so that they can share the seats among themselves, and each person in the group can get a seat. Train friends are an important part of your relationship circle, even beyond the few hours of commute, and many celebrate birthdays, weddings, go for vacations etc together.

“So I usually get a seat because I have this group of friends. So they reserve a seat for me. I have a friend so the seat is for her. But even if there is no seat, they sometimes give their own seat to me after some time.”

“There is a train which starts from Thane at 9 a.m. and there are six ladies. And they would celebrate their birthdays together. They would cut the cake and distribute cake and chocolates to the

people. I was on the train that day and I got some too and I was very happy that day. That was beautiful and they talk to us normally as if we are friends, it doesn't happen usually, otherwise, outside of the local train.

Many respondents bemoaned the fact that they do not have a fixed timetable, because of which they are unable to build relationships with other co-passengers whom they meet, while another cited housework and trip-chaining as the reason for her erratic travel timings, *"I have never made many friends. Usually, there are groups in the compartment. But due to my shifts and timings, it becomes difficult."*

"After getting married when I shifted to Thane, there was no fixed train that I used to travel because I had to leave my kids at preschool before going to work... so, I used to get on any train that was there at the platform." This emphasizes how access to leisure is often a privilege for women, and hence have to seek out and form their own spaces where they can socialize.

iii. Livelihood Uses: A sufficient amount of literature exists on the vendors of the informal economy who sell their ware inside the trains. Although they are a crucial component of the life of the Mumbai Locals and more so of the ladies' compartment, I would like to focus on the women passengers of the ladies' compartment who sell their products within this space. While the vendors use the train specifically for selling their wares, many women who live in the suburbs sell their products on their way to their workplaces. These are women who engage in a part-time business inside the Locals above and beyond their regular work, to complement their incomes. These women make use of a readily available customer base - their group of 'train friends', and the long hours spent within the compartments to market their products. They sell items ranging from kurtas and churidars to homemade pickles and ayurvedic hair oils. This is what I wrote in my field notes after I happened to see one such woman.

When I entered the train, it was already crowded, and I had to stand in the middle of a friends' group who were talking animatedly about something. Suddenly, a woman who was also laughing and talking with them took out a dozen or so plastic bags of packed ready-made kurtis and to-be-stitched churidar sets from her bag. She gave it first to the group of women with whom she was talking to, telling them that these were the latest designs she procured. She later passed on these packets to the interested onlookers. Some passengers, who were sitting far off, also requested that these cloth materials be passed on to them. Within a quarter of an hour, these packets had travelled the length of the entire compartment, with those who wanted to buy calling out and asking for prices.

I heard her say to another customer that she could not carry a certain type of apparel that day, and hence she will bring it the next day. The kurtis were of reasonable rate, and yet, she must easily have made a good enough profit that day.

A thing to be noted is that these women are not professional businesspersons, and engage in different kinds of jobs after they reach their destination. The items they sell are easy to carry and not bulky (unlike the train vendors who carry big and bulky products also), or they only carry a small amount and bring it the next time if there is demand for that product. As many women travel in the same train and compartment each day, a lot of the business dealings are made on trust, assuming the customer or the seller will be found in the same compartment and train at a particular time on any given day.

A few of the respondents whom I talked to also told me about match-makers. While some match-makers informally bring proposals for the unmarried women in their 'train friends' group, there are also professional match-makers who carry with them the bio-data of prospective grooms and also advertise their service inside the ladies' compartment in the form of posters. This information was completely new to me, and I had heard it for the first time from the respondent, who said, *"They also used to set rishtas (marriage proposals) also... so once they were talking to a girl about a boy who used to travel in the first class which is adjacent to the ladies' first class. and a proposal had come for that girl from this boy (...) but other aunties were like, 'no, no, that guy is not good (..) and he just stands there and stares at any girl who will come. so it's not good for her.' And the girl asked, 'okay, so should I say no to him?'... and... they had this file. They had this file with everything. I don't know if they were detectives or what of some underground world (laughs). And you won't believe it, with a xerox copy of their 10th ka certificate, their 12th ka certificate..."*

A thing to be noted here is that the first-class compartment for ladies and general first-class compartments are adjacent to each other, in fact, it is usually the same compartment with only metal bars dividing the two⁸. This makes for easy visibility into each other's compartments, which is partly also the reason why women feel comfortable travelling in the general first-class, but not in the second-class compartment. Another implication of this easy visibility, as illustrated in the above extract, is that the passengers of both compartments can easily keep a tab on the behaviours of each other. Phadke et al (2011) describe these partitions to have their "origins in the notion of men 'keeping a benevolent paternal eye' on women." But as the extract demonstrates, women also wield

⁸It may vary for different lines like WR or HR, or for the newer trains.

this ability for their ends. It is a classic case of ‘watchers being watched’.

3.3.4 Conclusion

This section tried to demonstrate how the need for gender-segregated spaces arises out of reasons which are not particularly related to safety. Gender segregation and the existence of the ladies' compartment is not just a “paternalist process of excluding women from urban life by positing them as a ward in need of protection” (Dean, 2017, p.19). But women actively exercise agency in shaping these infrastructures, as Bayat (2004) called it, “quiet encroachment of the ordinary”. It effectively allows them to redesign the urban structure “through small but consistent movements and pressures.” These are ordinary, everyday actions, but it creates a space where women from the periphery can claim their rights from the state and authorities.

4.0 Conclusion

4.1 Key Findings

This thesis set out to document the experiences of women who live in the far suburbs of Mumbai and commute to the city for work or study in a changing urban environment. Liberalization and globalization often create conditions of marginality for women who live in the suburbs and commute to the city centres, and this marginal position gets amplified during disasters for many women. The experiences of travelling were difficult, even extremely risky at times, with most women agreeing it has in some ways or the other impacted their physical and emotional health. Furthermore, having to juggle work and domestic responsibilities makes it even more challenging. What was seen was that most women had made their peace with such harrowing conditions, or on the other hand, found little ‘jugaads’, ways of coping through such circumstances.

Hence, for women, it is "their daily engagement in political action" within the limits of this gender-segregated space. This ability of women from the periphery to repurpose, resist, and challenge can be ascribed to their shared experience of commuting, of being together with other women over long hours within the confines of the ladies' compartment. These women have much more in common than just their peripheral geographical location, and as women, they also share their exclusion from public spaces, the double burden of housework and paid work, difficulty in accessing leisure and everyday struggles of commuting in harrowing conditions. As Roy (2003) says in her essay, *“The tangible experience of travelling on the overflowing trains has a distinct texture – a sense not only of one’s own body, but also of other bodies, jostling against one’s own, usurping*

space. While such journeys create a sense of self as different from others, the boundaries of distinction are constantly violated and refashioned. It is in this dialectic of self and otherness that commuter women articulate a collective identity.”

In the absence of restrooms and changing rooms for women in the city, the gender-segregated space, hence allows women a much-needed space where they collaboratively find ways to balance housework, find leisure and relax as they head to their homes to get ready for another day of work and travel. But this research also showed that the Mumbai Local experience is not a homogenous one, and how different identities, such as the Muslim identity creates tension within the train compartments.

4.2 The Way Forward

This thesis, as I mentioned in the limitations, only talks about the experiences of cis-gendered, heterosexual women. While the LGBTQ community and its allies are working towards achieving rights in public spaces, there are also growing calls for exclusivist cis-women-only spaces, particularly in the West. This is due to various narratives that the erasure of cis-women-only spaces such as washrooms, can lead to a loss of well-being for cis-gender women. Although such narratives of the erasure of female spaces are relatively less in India, they can have a significant impact on the lives of the hijra community who frequently use the ladies' compartment. My interviews showed that the ladies' compartment has the potential of being an inclusive space but to better understand the implications of these results, future studies could address the inclusion of transwomen into female-only spaces.

Further research on women from the peripheries can also enrich the literature on the experiences of women from extremely marginalized backgrounds. Most of the women in this thesis were from middle-class backgrounds, with jobs or family support that helped them sustain through the months of the strict lockdown. But in the course of my fieldwork, I was able to meet women from tribal villages who did not fare so well. These are women who daily use the Mumbai Locals to sell forest produce in the Dadar vegetable market and buy other essentials on their way home. But with the Locals shut, not only was their livelihood severely affected but also their nutrition, children's education and healthcare.

4.3 Personal Journey

This thesis started on a whim of an idea. I had recently relocated to the far suburbs, which meant

losing out on so many connections and friendships I had built over the years and replacing it with long hours of lonely train rides for anything ranging from college to better medical facilities, to meeting old friends and shopping. Living on the periphery of a city with a vibrant nightlife and mostly nocturnal citizens meant that one missed out on many things which were tantalizingly near, yet always out of reach. Many of our decisions revolve around train timings, which were carefully learnt by heart after years of travelling. It was a frustrating experience, but I found that the Local train journeys don't have to be so melancholy. What I found in the space called the ladies compartment was an interesting mix of experiences that ranged from partly absurd to utterly delightful mixed with the stressful conditions of overcrowding. The women I met went through these experiences every day often uncomplainingly, yet quietly finding ways that helped them cope with it. Talking with women from varied backgrounds helped me to understand these experiences are often mediated through their identities.

The pandemic incited a deep rethinking of what we all had termed the Mumbaikar experience as resilience, as the fault lines lay visibly exposed during the lockdown. Many of my friends and their mothers lost jobs, or 'voluntarily' left jobs, as there were no alternatives to be found to travel to their place of work. Through these interviews, I got to build stronger relationships with them, talking to them about their everyday struggles and moments of joy they found in the Mumbai Locals. Hence, in many ways, this research was also a deeply personal one.

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Appendix

Socio-demographic profile of respondents

Sr. no	Name	Age	Place of birth	Kind of paid work
1.	Aparna	36	Maharashtra	Security guard
2.	Kiran	22	Haryana	IT sector – software engineer
3.	Lizzy	58	Kerala	Office Superintendent, Western Railway
4.	Munazza	23	Maharashtra	Student
5.	Neha	28	Maharashtra	Bank officer
6.	Nuhi	23	Maharashtra	Student
7.	Palak	25	Rajasthan	CSR executive
8.	Rupali	26	Maharashtra	Accountant
9.	Teena	42	Kerala	Lab technician
10.	Umaima	22	Maharashtra	Student

Interview Guide

General Information

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Place of birth:
4. Kind of paid work:
5. Married/unmarried:
6. Boarding and alighting stations:
7. Time of travelling (peak/non-peak hour):
8. Type of train compartment (ladies/first class ladies/ first class/general):
9. Do you own a private vehicle (two/four wheeler):

Opening questions

1. Do you remember the first time you travelled on the local train? How was your experience?
2. How long have you been travelling in the Mumbai locals?
3. Have you always lived where you are living now? Or have you shifted from somewhere else?

Commute to work

1. Do you travel alone or with friends/ relatives?
2. How do you spend time when travelling?
3. Do you use the local train for reasons other than travelling to work? For example, visiting friends, relatives, etc.?
4. Do you prefer travelling in local trains for work or otherwise? What are the reasons for your preference/non-preference?

Relationships

1. Have there been incidents of unexpected generosity or solidarity which you fondly recall? Can you relate to them?
2. Have you been able to form new friendships or solidarity within the ladies' compartment? If yes, what factors led to your friendship or solidarity? Is this solidarity translated outside the ladies' compartment too? If not, can you share the reasons?

Exclusively for peak time travellers (questions 19-21):

1. Has the high density of people on the train affected your health (both physical and emotional)? If yes, how?
2. Has it affected your work schedules or even possibly your decision to work?
3. What are your strategies/ways of coping for navigating the extremely crowded spaces?

Gender segregation

1. Have you travelled in the general compartment of the local train? If yes, was the experience of travelling different from that of the ladies' compartment? How?
2. Would you consider travelling regularly in the general compartment? What factors would lead you to opt for it on a regular basis?

Miscellaneous

1. Do you think there are any major differences in the general ladies and first-class compartment in terms of comfort or otherwise.
2. Have you observed any changes over the years, in terms of the demographics or comfort etc?
3. Have you travelled in local trains of different cities? If yes, was the experience of travelling different from the Mumbai local trains? How?

4. Should women's compartments be restricted to biological (cis-gender) women?

Newer developments

1. How has the spread of the pandemic Covid-19 and the subsequent shutting down of the Mumbai locals affected your work and life?
2. Do you think travelling in Mumbai locals is ever going to be the same as it was pre-pandemic? If not, what may be the changes and how drastic would it be?

Ending questions

1. Do you think the metro trains or any other mode of transport will eventually replace the local trains? Would you prefer it to happen? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever considered switching to an alternate mode of transport? Why/ why not?
3. Do you consider the Mumbai local train to be an enabler/a crucial factor in your decision to work full-time far from home?

Suggestions

1. What changes do you think would aid in increasing the user experience of daily commuters like yourself?