

Filtering Density and Doing the Maintenance Work

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Abstract:

In this paper we argue that the *infra* economy of the city contributes to the metabolic functioning of everyday dense rhythms of urban life. In Indian cities, this complex work performed by the city's vulnerable and marginalised labouring classes produces a secure, sanitary and aesthetic city, keeping the crowds at bay and yet maintaining desirable limits of density.

Keywords: *infra* economy, security guards, waste, sanitation workers, density, cities, India, urban.

Representations of Density

In the post-apocalyptic film, 'I am a Legend' (2007), scientist Robert Neville roams the barren streets of New York City emptied by a man-made plague that destroyed the city's population. There is no one and no hope; devoid of all its crowds the city is represented as an overgrown purposeless jungle, just a mess of abandoned cars and shattered bridges, lacking human density that makes it a thriving city. On the contrary, in the eco-dystopic classic called (1973) *Soylent Green*¹ density is represented by an overcrowded chaos in the streets where over 20 million people are out of work. Crowds are starving and dying in extreme poverty, people are horded along narrow corridors and staircases of devastated homes. A fortified wall separates the crowds from the rich who live in posh apartments that come with young women they call 'furniture'.

Metonyms of congestion, hunger, squalor, death and starvation, are often used to represent the sites where poor working classes live and survive. The award-winning British-American film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) is replete with such grotesque and

clichéd metonyms that foster stereotypes: slum tours, horrid depictions of misery and poverty, filth, crime, and the congested-dirty-noisy streets of Bombay. These representations are powerful as they produce ways of seeing and interpreting density and diverse sets of populations in the city.

In the North American and European imagination² density in Asian cities is often signified through images of crowds and drudgery – swarms of poor, hungry people, slums, squalor, poverty and blight – based on Malthusian³ and Dickensian⁴ ideas of populations who have to be kept in ‘check’ through wars, famines, epidemics, improvement schemes⁵ or ecological disasters. At the discursive level, these representations of density are symbolic of the power relations that inevitably produce and normalize ways of seeing the city and its populations. Such unexciting and monochromatic discursive constructs of density are often stuck between overwhelming crowds and misery or desolation—either too many or just too few survivors. In these ways of seeing, density is conflated with overpopulation and there is a fixation over the uncontrollability and unfamiliarity of crowds represented through chaos and disorder. Such archaic ways of seeing density are disconnected from the socio-material realities of everyday life of cities, but most importantly they strip people off of power, dignity and agency as actors who continuously produce and transform the *habitus*.

When high-density and crowds are collapsed into one definition, the underlying structural issues of poverty, race, class or caste based inequalities, climate change impacts etc., i.e. the actual lived realities of cities are never tackled directly but projected as a consequence of density that often emerges from or ends up in total chaos and collapse. Absolute dystopic constructs of density are problematic also because they depict the urban labouring classes as masses who form the population excess, the unwanted and undesirable characters in the story of density in the city.

We argue in this paper, that it is in fact the labouring masses of the city that do the work of filtering and sustaining the dense rhythms and flows of everyday life to keep the city moving and ‘orderly’. In high-density Asian cities, not only does urban labour make the city functional and liveable, but also their work contributes to preserving the aesthetic value of space and making density appealing and desirable for the city’s elites.

In Indian mega-cities like Mumbai and Delhi, our sites of study, density is neither a symptom nor a surprise. However, it is telling of the textures of urbanity it produces, the ways in which people organize and mobilize lives around it, the ways in which urban labour works through dense networks and arrangements, and in that process fragments together functional modes of city life. Therefore, we argue that maintaining the socio-temporal rhythms of density functional is constant work. This work involves filtering the movement and passage of crowds in order to keep city spaces usable and aesthetic. In Indian cities it is the labouring classes like watchmen and security guards, bus and railway drivers, traffic controllers, waste and sanitation workers, construction labourers, transport helpers, etc. who perform the work of sustaining the dense rhythms of everyday life and actively contribute to the social production of space.

Through ethnographic accounts of the work performed by security guards in Delhi, and sanitation labour in Mumbai we explain that this work of sustaining dense rhythms of everyday life serves an infrastructural and an aesthetic function: First, the labouring classes form a crucial part of the infrastructure of the city, they facilitate and control the constant circulation of people, objects, and activities across spaces and hierarchies. In performing this role they are constantly provisioning and improvising dense urban arrangements. For example in this context, the waste workers in the

garbage grounds of Mumbai serve a crucial role in the metabolic functioning of the neighbourhood and the city by doing the work of picking, sorting, collecting, segregating and recycling waste on a daily basis. Not only the work they perform keeps the city functional so it doesn't sink under its own pile of garbage, but also allows for other dense urban arrangements to co-exist and operate in an orchestrated manner.

Second, is an aesthetic function: linked to the infrastructural, the work of labouring classes is to preserve and enhance the aesthetic value of urban spaces by offering a secure, organized and desirable experience of city life to the elites. For example in this context, the security guards in the malls of Delhi regulate density by keeping in check the inflow and outflow of desired numbers of people at a given time. Their work is to filter through crowds, control who passes in and who stays out of the elite malls, and in performing this role they preserve the aesthetic appeal and status quo of the place. In the following sections, we elaborate on qualitative interviews collected with security guards in Delhi and sanitation workers in Mumbai between 2017 and 2019, to explain the work that the city's labouring classes do to manage and sort through every day densities.

Labour at the gates: Eyes and Ears in the streets of Delhi

In the sprawling streets of Delhi, security guards and watchmen are a part of the social apparatus and infrastructure that filters the dense temporality of crowds and movements of people across spaces. Private security guards in particular stand as interface workers who allow the permeability of crowds into middle and upper middle class enclaves like malls (Carrière, 2018). Their role in maintaining the metabolic functioning of city gives them provisional authority that is made visible by the uniform they wear and the stick they carry. The uniform and the stick sets them apart from the crowds in the city,

and allows them to sift through the crowds- as without the uniform the same guards would be seen as part of the loitering crowds (Phadke, 2013).

In Delhi, security guards are supposed be the ‘eyes and ears’ of the police in the street, however their role is less as prosthetic agents of state or police, and more as agents who preserve and reproduce the exclusivities of gated enclaves and malls. The labour of guards produces a guarded class that is secure and shielded from the ‘chaos of the crowds’ in the streets. By controlling the passage and circulation other categories of service labour like domestic workers, street hawkers, vegetable sellers, waste workers, delivery boys etc., they to filter the permeability of crowds and keep city spaces (such as malls, markets, housing enclaves, public parks, commercial buildings) class and caste exclusive. The mere presence of thousands of security guards to keep crowds of undesirable people at bay is a ‘normal’ feature in most Indian cities.

Research (Carrière, 2018) conducted in Delhi’s suburbs of Dwarka revealed that many gated housing enclaves have a design and layout pre-planned for the presence of security guards- and for the availability of service labour in general like maid servants, cooks, drivers, cleaners etc. The daily work of guards in this neighbourhood is to monitor the entry and exit of other categories of labour, sometimes frisking and surveillance but other times exchanging information about the neighbourhood with the service labour. The work of filtering through crowds and maintaining densities takes multiple socio-temporal forms; for example, in the work of guards the ‘night-shift’ is always more riskier, even though it is quieter and less crowded. In Delhi, cold winter nights allow for shared solidarities and proximities between the different categories of labour over cups of tea, cigarettes and bonfires- often guards are seen sharing moments away from the dense rhythms of the day with taxi drivers, street hawkers and other labourers (Carrière, 2018).

In the malls of Delhi on the contrary, the work of security guards is more demanding as they are required to constantly screen and investigate the inflows and outflows of crowds, at the same maintaining an ideal density for all to enjoy. A guard shared in an interview that his job is to allow the passage of ‘decent looking’ customers into the mall and keep out ‘rowdy crowds’ out of the mall– a filtering based on aesthetics and appearance- or what Bourdieu calls the *hexis of class* (Bourdieu, 1980).

This process of streaming through crowds and maintaining desirable limits of daily densities plays out rhythmically as guards stand literally and figuratively at the gates of class distinction. The manifestation of visible differences between those who are allowed to enter gated neighbourhoods or malls and those who have no business of being there encourages private security companies and their customers to advertise by creating an image of the crowd as ‘nuisance’ (Ghertner, 2015; Carrière, 2018). The metonym of crowd as nuisance allows private security companies to speculate on fear, anxiety and insecurity and offer their services to the rich and privileged of the city. In a city like Delhi, where aspirations for aesthetics and exclusivity have become a class norm, the presence of guards not only provides security but also a socio-spatial hegemony of the upper castes and classes over the masses of the city while remaining severely dependent on their labour.



Figure 1: Security checks at an affluent mall in Delhi. Authors, 2017

Blocked gutters, foul smells, life as usual: Daily rhythms of density in Mumbai

Govandi, a busy neighbourhood located in the eastern periphery is a microcosm of dense Indian cities like Mumbai; brimming with life, hope and action. Situated in close proximity to the city's largest dumping grounds (Deonar), Govandi is a patchwork of intensely networked formal and informal infrastructural activities, all actively in sync and flow to keep the city clean and functional. This high-density, low-income neighbourhood is a vulnerable and marginalised site in the city where residents face severe structural issues of poverty, risk to air and vector borne infectious diseases like tuberculosis, climate change impacts like flooding, and possibly the lowest rates of human development (Mumbai Human Development Report, 2009). Despite severe social and economic inequalities and stigmatisation residents survive and re-create

conditions for urban life, in doing so they perform a crucial role in the metabolic functioning of what Gidwani (2015) calls the city's *infra* economy⁶ of waste. The work of repair and renewal of the city performed by the sanitation labour relies on thickly networked proximities of neighbourhoods like Govandi, they comprise the *infra* economy of sanitation in the city, and their work we argue, is crucial to regulate and restore the flows of waste densities in the city.

Residents we interviewed in Govandi form an irreplaceable part of the formal-informal *infra* economy of waste in Mumbai, by performing the work of collecting, sorting, fixing, un-blocking, de-clogging, scavenging, recycling etc.- their infrastructural labour reproduces value chains and transforms the city's waste and sanitation economy. This work maintains the essential metabolic functioning of the city so it doesn't sink under its own debris and also produces and transforms the aesthetic value of urban spaces so as to contain its dense rhythms of everyday life.

Naresh, a sanitation worker we interviewed (2019) explains that his daily work begins when he is out with his neighbour Altaf, mapping and planning to repair open sewers and gutters in the city. At the buzz of a phone call Naresh and Altaf head straight to the site where the local contractor directs them to conduct the repair work. Altaf relies on the labour of few other 'young boys' from his neighbourhood, who work on less than daily wages and are ready to dive in to clean open gutters and sewers for the sake of survival. In the minutes that I barely break into a conversation with them, one of the boys readily takes off his clothes and begins to climb down the sewer with his bare hands a stick- no gloves, no helmet, no safety equipment, ripped off his dignity. Altaf mentions that since they don't have safety equipment, a stick helps them to measure the depth of the sewer while climbing down and sometimes maybe hush away a snake or two, he jokes. They worry that Mumbai is always so crowded and busy that it is hard to

find the space and time to do the work of repairing gutters and sewers. Naresh says that “*Mumbaiwalas*⁷ do not tolerate any interruptions to their daily dense rhythms of life; they need the city to be open and moving 24x7, and traffic to be circulating at all times”, thereby making their work challenging. Altaf adds that, “someone has to do it, and often it is people from lower-caste (Dalit) or Muslim neighbourhoods like us who end up in such risky, low paying, and unappreciated jobs- but if not for our work the Mumbai would sink in it’s own shit”.

Altaf and Naresh are both second-generation sanitation workers in their family. Naresh comes from a Dalit⁸ family; he left high school and joined his father’s work soon after he was diagnosed with a multi drug resistant type of Tuberculosis. Altaf says he is from a poor Muslim family from Govandi where both his parents were waste workers in the Deonar garbage grounds, and even though he had decided he would not do this work, he ended up in this profession despite college education. For surviving deep-rooted structural inequalities in a religious and caste discriminated society like India, many sanitation workers like Naresh and Altaf contribute laboriously to produce a sanitary city- repairing, fixing and renewing the city and it’s densities of solid, liquid and human waste. A majority of the city’s sanitary labour works in inhuman, undignified and insanitary conditions and is not even given any protection by the State, despite the existence of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act of 2013, every single day workers mostly from Dalit and Muslim backgrounds continue to live and die cleaning sewers and gutters (Swaroop, 2019).

Altaf explains that for most sanitation workers, it takes intricate knowledge of the functioning of the city’s complex sanitation system as well as certain *resilience* to sensorial, material and atmospheric intensities- to the smells, sights and embodied experiences of waste and toxicity. The work of producing and maintaining a sanitary

city in which everyday rhythms and movements of a dense urban life are maintained and controlled requires a regular engagement with infrastructure, politics and the city's socio-economic systems. While sanitation workers like Altaf, Naresh and others systematically engage with the State and parastatal actors to produce the necessary infrastructures required to maintain a sanitary city, for most residents their work remains invisible. It is only when the waste and sanitation workers strike⁹ against oppressive State systems demanding better wages and working conditions, in these moments of 'disruption' and 'rupture' of everyday dense rhythms that the upper castes and classes take notice of the intense politics of sanitation work.

The work of sanitation labour not only maintains but also produces and sustains multiple densities of urban life; workers in Mumbai comprise the highly mobile *infra* economy that repairs and renews the city by managing high-density socio-temporal flows of crowds, traffic, infrastructures, and everyday activities day and night. This work is also critical for maintaining the quality of life and aesthetic value of urban space as desired by the city's affluent residents.



Figure 2: Workers repairing an underground sewer in the city. Authors, 2019

Conclusion

Representations of dense Asian cities are stuck in metonyms of slums, squalor, crowds and misery- completely devoid of the textures, arrangements, politics and solidarities that go into producing, managing and regulating dense moments of urban life. In this paper we elaborate on the work of the city's labouring classes like security guards, and sanitation workers to name a few, whose job is to ensure routinized urban orders and ideal flows of density are maintained. Every single day the city's labour navigates through thick complexities of urban socio-political and economic systems, hierarchical codes, and human-technical-infrastructure networks to reproduce and preserve the city's spatial order.

While the labouring classes often remain absent and invisible in the political imaginary of the city, they comprise the *infra* economy whose work is systematically

enmeshed in the organised and unorganised chains of value and redistribution of capital (Gidwani, 2015). The work of regulating a dense city life requires embodied spatial knowledge, skills, tactics, and ambition- the city's labouring classes despite the violence and vulnerability of the work contribute to making the city functional and desirable.

In busy malls and gated residential enclaves of Delhi, guards for example are remaking the class and caste borders of the city while being excluded and marginalized from the city they produce (Simone, 2009; Gidwani, 2015). The work performed by guards produces secure and habitable spaces for the city's elites while filtering the crowds out. Their role is precisely to limit the density in a city to a desirable level, or from the elite's perspective to keep the crowd at bay, when ensuring the availability of a numerous service class.

The invisible work of sanitation labour is to ensure that densities of solid and liquid waste are kept out, underground, or dumped away in a landfill with minimal disruption and nuisance. Repairing, sorting, fixing, unblocking, de-clogging, cleaning and renewing- they work relentlessly to improve socio-technical infrastructures like pipes, sewers, gutters and garbage grounds, while also being flexible, spontaneous, mobile and ingenious in their ways of reordering congested and *filthy* spaces in the city. We argue that maintaining a functional and *orderly* city requires the work of brokering, disrupting, combining, renewing and reforming existing densifications of people, politics, hierarchies and systems- in order to recreate and repurpose city life and this is the work performed by the city's labouring classes.

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- 1 Soylent Green: In the novel and film, Soylent green is a food substitute that is originally made with Soyabean and Lentil, however as resources have depleted, the company comes up with an idea to tackle the problem of overpopulation and starvation that is to make a processed food protein made of human bodies. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soylent_Green
- 2 For example: The Population Bomb (1968) by Paul Ehrlich, The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind (1972) by D H Meadows et al. Fiction: Issac Asimov's The Caves of Steel (1954), J G Ballard's Billenium and other collections (1961), Richard Wilson's "The Eight Billion" (July 1965), Harry Harrison's Make Room! Make Room! (1966), and Soylent Green (1973) – are some classic fiction and non-fiction books.
- 3 In 1798 the UK economist Thomas R Malthus (1766-1834) published his Essay on the Principle of Population, as it affects the Future Improvement of Society that influenced many other academic and fictional representations of overpopulation and crowds.
- 4 <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/slums>
<https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01202196/document>
- 5 James Elmes, Metropolitan Improvements (London: Jones & Co., etc., 1827), p.2.
- 6 Gidwani (2015) explains "the term 'infra-economy' has a double valence: it denotes, on the one hand, an economy that is denied recognition by state and civil society (and is 'seen' only at moments of crisis, as an object of condemnation or reform); and on the other, an economy that is critical to the production of urban space such that it is conducive for capitalist accumulation".
- 7 Mumbaiwalas: or the middle class and upper class residents of Mumbai.
- 8 In the oppressive Hindu caste system the term Dalit or untouchables is attributed by the upper castes to members of the lowest castes.
- 9 Several cases of sanitation workers strike as reported in the local news:
<https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-11-03/india-learning-what-happens-when-you-treat-sanitation-workers-garbage>
<https://www.dnaindia.com/delhi/report-city-stinks-as-sanitation-workers-remain-on-strike-2553695>
<https://www.mumbailive.com/en/civic/bmc-safai-workers-on-strike-against-privatisation-of-waste-collection-in-mumbai-30291>