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Shilpa Phadke

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ARTICLE

Defending Frivolous Fun: Feminist Acts of Claiming Public Spaces in South Asia

Shilpa Phadke

School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India

ABSTRACT

Can fun be a serious politics in feminist struggles? That is the question that animates this paper. While claims for the economic and political participation of women have gained increasing legitimacy, the demand for fun may often be seen not just as frivolous, but also as undermining the seriousness of the feminist project itself. The paper engages with three feminist campaigns, two in India and one in Pakistan, that assert women's rights to occupy the public for fun. The paper refutes critiques that suggest that feminist campaigns to claim public space in the city are illustrative of neo-liberal subjecthood and reflect the birth of new entrepreneurial selves. It also reflects on contemporary feminist debates in India around what counts as feminist, arguing that claims for fun might in fact be central to a feminist politics in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS

Feminism; fun; gatekeeping; neo-liberal; public space

In December 2012, thousands of Indians poured out onto the streets, courting lathis and water cannons, discounting the usual sites allocated to protest, especially in Delhi but also in other cities across the country. People carried large banners that exhorted the state and its citizens to protect women and to teach their men not to rape, in response to the gang rape and murder of a young physiotherapy student.

While the young woman met most criteria to be classified as a 'good victim'—she was out at night but not too late, she was escorted by a male friend, and she fought her assailants hard—she had also been out for fun, watching a film with her friend, and was returning home when the attack happened on a Blue Line bus in Delhi.

There have been many similar protests around women's safety in public and, like this one, they tend to take place immediately following a specific assault and focus largely on demands for protection or sanitising public space. We have also seen other ways of claiming public space for women in the shape of Take Back the Night marches and similar campaigns. In most of these contexts, it is women's access to public space for a purpose—usually related to education, employment or consumption—that receives the greatest recognition. But being out for fun is much less likely to be defended, much less fought for. While work and the workplace continue to be fraught

CONTACT Shilpa Phadke shilpa@tiss.edu

for many women who have to negotiate sexism, sexual harassment and the gender pay gap, there is consensus around women's right to work. In this context, women may legitimately access public space in order to commute between home and work, preferably during daylight hours, but also in a limited way after dark, provided they demonstrate both respectability and purpose.

In the early 2000s, I co-wrote a book, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*, which engaged substantially with the idea of fun in relation to public space, arguing that fun is a deeply relevant politics for effecting feminist change.[1] We argued that what women need in order to access public space is not safety—which is inevitably conditional upon women being respectable—but rather the right to take risks without their presence being questioned. We pushed this line of thinking further to suggest that for women to have unconditional access to public space, everyone else, including those perceived to be unfriendly to women, should also have unconditional access. We argued that loitering—that is, hanging out in public without purpose—might be one way in which all citizens, marginal and otherwise, might be able to viscerally claim public space.[2]

In recent years, one has seen a growing number of movements and campaigns that engage with women's access to the city and its public spaces. Fun has been central, either implicitly or explicitly, to many of these feminist campaigns. Despite this, accessing the public for fun continues to be deeply suspect, not just by more conservative patriarchal voices, but also by feminist voices that see such claims to public space as both a middle-class luxury and steeped in individuality and neo-liberal desires.

In this paper, I engage with what fun means in relation to public space. I discuss three feminist campaigns: the 'Blank Noise' project, the 'Why Loiter Movement' and 'Girls at Dhabas', all of which articulate women's right to the public for fun. I address feminist critiques that read claims to public space by women as neo-liberal, globalised, even hedonistic practices. I then engage with questions of feminist gatekeeping and the debates around what counts as feminist. I argue that fun challenges rather than conforms to neo-liberal ideologies and that a feminist discourse for the twenty-first century must embrace fun.

What is fun?

In *Why Loiter*, we devoted one section entirely to asking who was having fun in the city. We navigated different parts of Mumbai and talked to different groups of women, arguing that, for women, fun in public space often involved an inordinate amount of

1. The research that led to this book was conducted as part of the 'Gender and Space' project at PUKAR, Mumbai, in collaboration with Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade. Thus, henceforth, when I refer to 'our' research or use the plural 'we', it is this work and these colleagues that I invoke.
2. Shilpa Phadke, 'Dangerous Liaisons: Women and Men: Risk and Reputation in Mumbai', in *Review of Women's Studies, Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, no. 17 (2007), pp. 1510–18; Shilpa Phadke, Shilpa Ranade and Sameera Khan, 'Why Loiter? Radical Possibilities for Gendered Dissent', in Melissa Butcher and Selvaraj Velayutham (eds), *Dissent and Cultural Resistance in Asia's Cities* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 185–203; Shilpa Phadke, '"You Can Be Lonely in a Crowd": The Production of Safety in Mumbai', in *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (2005), pp. 41–62; and Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011).

subterfuge and strategising. In understanding fun, we engaged with Asef Bayat's definition that sees fun as:

> … an array of ad hoc, non-routine, and joyful conducts—ranging from playing games, joking, dancing, and social drinking, to involvement in playful art, music, sex and sport, to particular ways of speaking, laughing, appearing, or carrying oneself—where individuals break free temporarily from the disciplined constraints of daily life, normative obligations, and organised power. Fun is a metaphor for the expression of individuality, spontaneity, and lightness, in which joy is the central element. While joy is neither an equivalent nor a definition of fun, it remains a key component of it…. [F]un often points to usually improvised, spontaneous, free-form, changeable, and thus unpredictable expressions and practices.[3]

Drawing on Bayat, as well as scholarship on sexuality and pleasure,[4] our own definition of fun suggested that it was:

> a verbal shorthand for pleasure, a concept that encompasses fun, but is much more than that. Pleasure is highly subjective and is inextricably linked to a range of choices including those related to sexuality, dress, matrimony (or not), motherhood (or not), to name some. Pleasure might be found in solitude as much as in company; it involves the visceral body as much as the untamed mind; and it involves activity as much as simply doing nothing—in other words, loitering.[5]

Both Bayat's definition and our own point to some of the ways in which one might define fun, but also to the notion that fun is deeply subjective and therefore defies definition. Non-productive fun in relation to urban public spaces might include: wandering around streets during the daytime and at night; using maps to get around as well as seeking to get lost in the labyrinthine city; hanging around for hours drinking tea at a corner stall or sitting along the sea-front; all kinds of street shopping and eating; sitting around in a park reading or eating; playing in an open *maidan*. These represent only some possibilities of how one might seek fun in the city. Fun, then, is any activity that produces a visceral sense of enjoyment, that contributes to a sense of claim to the city and a feeling of belonging to it.

When women claim fun in public spaces, they produce in others not happiness but anxiety, born out of the desire to restrict women in order to control their sexuality. In this sense, the idea of fun invoked here is in keeping with Sara Ahmed's argument that the happiness of all is not a necessary social good. Ahmed suggests, 'The female troublemaker might be trouble because she gets in the way of the happiness of others'.[6] When women choose to wander in urban public spaces, their actions are perceived to signal not well-behaved, good women, but rather those Ahmed refers to as 'troublemakers, dissenters, killers of joy', often creating unhappiness for their families and communities who see them as recalcitrant and in need of control.[7] Fun for women in public, then, inevitably involves being difficult women who do not conform to an idealised vision. This version of fun creates trouble, even as it troubles the boundaries

3. Asef Bayat, 'Islamism and the Politics of Fun', in *Public Culture*, Vol. 19, no. 3 (2007), pp. 433–59.
4. Here I refer to scholarship in line with the papers in Carole Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London/Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).
5. Phadke, Khan and Ranade, *Why Loiter?*, pp. 112–13.
6. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 60.
7. *Ibid*., p. 17.

of what is acceptable behaviour for women in its quest to push the boundaries of access in the city.

Too much fun: Reflections on three campaigns

What happens when political campaigns are also fun? In this section, I engage with three feminist claims for public space being articulated in the contemporary moment: the Blank Noise project and the Why Loiter Movement, both in India, and Girls at Dhabas, across the border in Pakistan. In engaging with the form of these campaigns, I use the words 'protest' and 'performance' at different points. I see the three campaigns as inhabiting both protest and performance in their articulation of claims, sometimes separately and at other times simultaneously.[8]

I would like to acknowledge here that I am connected to all three movements in some way or another. The Blank Noise project began at the same time that we began our research and we have been in conversation with them since the very beginning. The Why Loiter Movement grew out of our *Why Loiter* book. When we discovered a group of women who were actually taking our ideas forward, we got in touch, met and even became friends. Similarly, we wrote to Girls at Dhabas as soon as we encountered their campaign and we have since been in conversation and even collaborated with them in online spaces.[9] They have also drawn on our book to buttress their movement.

The Blank Noise project grew out of an artistic college project dreamed up by Jasmeen Patheja when she was a student at the Srishti School of Design in Bengaluru in the early 2000s. Blank Noise uses a variety of strategies and sets up public performances to challenge street sexual harassment. It also has public installations of clothing that women wore when they were harassed. This is crowdsourced under the title, 'I Never Ask For It'. When Blank Noise began, it used a strategy taken from the Hollaback movement of taking photographs of perpetrators of street sexual harassment. However, they soon realised—and were also critiqued for the fact—that the largest number of their photographs were of lower-class men. Since then, the Blank Noise project has tried to shift its focus away from individual perpetrators.[10] Another Blank Noise campaign calls for Action Heroes to walk alone. A campaign called *Akeli Awaara Azaad* (On Her Own, Unapologetic, Free) invited women to share what these words meant to them, and many women did, often wearing T-shirts printed with these words and writing narratives which were then shared on a blog.[11]

Blank Noise also initiated Meet to Sleep, a campaign that invites women to sleep in parks as a way of claiming space. Women take mats and water or nothing at all and nap on park lawns and benches. The Why Loiter Movement has also participated in this project. I have joined this campaign twice, once with my seventy-year-old mother and then five-year-old daughter. As you nap in the park, the security guard will ask

8. A longer discussion of protest and performance as forms of political engagement is an important one but beyond the ambit of this paper.
9. Anuradha Sengupta, 'No LoC for Loitering Women', *Hindu Businessline* (15 April 2016) [https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/know/no-loc-for-loitering-women/article8476038.ece, accessed 24 Sept. 2019].
10. Elizabeth Losh, 'Human Rights and Social Media in India: Blank Noise', Connected Learning Alliance (2013) [https://clalliance.org/blog/human-rights-and-social-media-in-india-blank-noise/, accessed 12 April 2019].
11. Blank Noise, '*Akeli Awaara Azaad*' [http://www.blanknoise.org/akeliawaaraazaad, accessed 5 Dec. 2019].

you to leave, and the idea is to engage him in conversation: 'Who has instructed you to ask people not to sleep? Why do you think people can't sleep in a park? Do you think it hurts anyone?' By this time a small crowd has gathered. Everyone has an opinion. Some support you. Some cite law and order. There is a discussion. You talk of people's rights. Someone might say how much the city has changed and become anti-people. By this time, you have taken a photograph of yourself sleeping or somebody else has. Later you can post it online where there will be more conversation. Much of Blank Noise operates in this way, encouraging conversations both as part of the performance as well as afterwards, online—and, in fact, the online posts are yet another performance, whose photographs must be curated just right.

The Why Loiter Movement was begun in 2014 by theatre artist and writer Neha Singh who read the book *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* and decided to put its ideas into practice. She initiated a movement where a group of women loiter on the streets and in parks every Sunday. Since then they have played games in parks, sung songs on the Metro and wandered the streets well after midnight, claiming public space, including its risk. When men wanted to join, they were invited—drawing on a Turkish initiative—to come in drag and 'Walk Like a Woman'. The Mumbai initiative also spawned one in Jaipur, and there have been sporadic loitering interventions in Aligarh and Pune as well.

The group started a blog to share their stories of loitering. In the opening lines of the very first post, Devina Kapoor writes that a group of girls are loitering in the city without purpose, which is a rather big thing if you are a girl because your reputation will be questioned. But despite this, '*these handful of girls with a vague vision in their minds are out and spreading in the city. You better watch out!*'[12] In another such post, Neha Singh writes:

> When I read the book 'Why loiter?' that spoke about public spaces that were free/open and accessible to all, they warned the reader to not include malls, movie theatres, restaurants and coffee shops, which are essentially privately owned spaces that pose as public spaces. Public spaces, in the purist sense, mean public parks that preferably do not have an entry fee, train and bus stops and depots, beaches, roads, pavements etc. These spaces did seem risky at first, but when I started loitering in such spaces, more often than not, I felt calm, happy, fulfilled and replenished.[13]

In a later blog post, she writes about facilitating a workshop with a group of seventeen-year-old students who asked how the Why Loiter Movement was going to change the country. Singh pointed to other similar movements elsewhere and argued that this is 'not a coincidence, it's a collective. The only way something like a why loiter movement can be sustained is if it is locally pioneered, is fun, is personal'. She argues that the revolution must be for oneself and that loitering is connected fundamentally to 'simple joys'.[14]

12. Devina Kapoor, 'Why Loiter Exactly?' (4 Aug. 2014) [http://whyloiter.blogspot.com/2014/08/why-loiter-exactly.html, accessed 12 Sept. 2014].
13. Neha Singh, 'Open, Green and Cost Free Spaces Perfect for Loitering in Bombay' (13 Aug. 2014) [http://whyloiter.blogspot.com/2014/08/open-green-and-cost-free-spaces-perfect.html, accessed 12 Sept. 2014].
14. Neha Singh, 'Let's Start a Revolution … But How?' (26 June 2016) [https://whyloiter.blogspot.com/2016/06/lets-start-revolutionbut-how-neha-singh.html, accessed 12 Sept. 2019].

Neha Singh has pointed out that while large protests and Take Back the Night marches have their place in a feminist politics of claim-staking, for her, the embodied claim of wandering in the city on her own or with a few other women is transformative. She is steadfast in the claim that micro-transformations matter.[15] While Singh tends to be the most vocal among the loitering group, the group does not have a leader. If one is to take one's cue from the blog, the engagements of this itinerant group of loitering women and the re-imagining of one's body in relation to the hostile city may also be read as acts of reclaiming citizenship.

Girls at Dhabas is an initiative by young Pakistani women that began in Karachi in 2015. It started when one of the founders, Sadia Khatri, posted a photograph of herself at a roadside tea stall, a *dhaba*, that was peopled by men—as such spaces often are. Since then Girls at Dhabas have played cricket on the street, organised cycling rallies and run tea stalls. The group is active on various social media sites and has many followers. They also run a podcast called the *Behenchara Diaries*. In an interview, Sadia Khatri articulates the pleasure of the public: 'I think there is something amazing about just being outside without any set purpose in mind. When you're alone even more so: you could end up striking a conversation with a stranger; you end up discovering a new place, writing a new poem; sometimes you spend hours sitting in one place watching strangers and processing your own thoughts'.[16] The sense of being part of a collective that Neha Singh articulates finds resonance in Sadia Khatri's words. In an interview, Khatri was quoted as saying:

> We have definitely found a lot of strength from 'Why Loiter?', as well as other groups such as Blank Noise and 'Feminism in India'. It's reassuring to know this work isn't being done in isolation. It's particularly encouraging to know that there is a history and context to gender dynamics in public spaces in South Asia that many people are trying to battle …. It is incredible and relieving to know there is a bigger support group and resource base than we realised, that so much more can be done when we do it together.[17]

These campaigns are located in a long history: the desire to access the public without restriction seems to know no boundaries, geographical, temporal or indeed class. In 1930, in her evocatively titled *Street Haunting: A London Adventure*, Virginia Woolf wrote of seeking to wander the streets of London using the alibi of wanting to buy a pencil. Writing in 1905, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain reminded us of the irrationality of locking up potential victims of assault, women, and letting potential perpetrators, men, walk freely. Elizabeth Wilson's *The Sphinx in the City* (1991) critiques an anti-urban sentiment and a masculine quest for order, suggesting that women have become 'an interruption in the city, a symptom of disorder, and a problem: in fact, *the Sphinx* in the city'. She invokes a new vision for cities and 'a new "feminine" voice in praise of cities'. Lauren Elkin's 2017

15. Personal conversation with Neha Singh, March 2016.
16. 'Spotlight: Girls at Dhabas', *The Missing Slate* (24 Mar. 2016) [https://themissingslate.com/2016/03/24/girls-at-dhabas/, accessed 24 Sept. 2019].
17. Anuradha Sengupta, 'Feminism over Chai', *The Hindu* (16 April 2016) [https://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/anuradha-sengupta-interviews-sadia-khatri-on-the-feminist-project-girlsatdhabas/article8479509.ece, accessed 24 Sept. 2019].

book, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*, explores similar pleasures.[18]

These three movements offer us new feminist voices that seek to engage cities, to engage other citizens in a dialogue whose outcomes are not certain or predictable. They may well change something significant in relation to women's access to urban public spaces and the gendered ideologies that govern them. Or they may only change something infinitesimal, the way some women walk in the city and the way a few people see women. Their interaction with public spaces as spaces for recreation, hanging out, loitering and fun offers a new site of engagement with the politics of both feminism and citizenship.

Claiming public space is not neo-liberal

Wandering women enjoying the streets are troublesome to their families, but wandering women enjoying the streets and claiming fun as feminism have also been the source of trouble for some feminist scholars and activists. Gendered claims to public space are being most vocally articulated by a demographic that can be described as middle class and relatively privileged. This has often led to such claims being seen as niche, even anchored to neo-liberal regimes. One line of feminist argument sees these projects as being tied to the creation of new, entrepreneurial selves[19] and as representing desires for freedom by unfettered subjects.[20] Gupta's critique of the Blank Noise project suggests that the focus on 'individual reflection on women's experiences of the city and their dreams for its future' be read as 'an example of how neo-liberal agency is asserted and articulated'. She further suggests that the 'emphasis on the successes and heroism of the participants … resonates with neo-liberalism's emphasis on cultivating entrepreneurial selves who take responsibility for themselves'.[21] There is sometimes a direct connection drawn between these women's claims to public space and claims to privatised spaces of consumption. As is clear from these critiques, fun troubles the boundaries of what might be seen as acceptable feminist politics.

This critique links fun to neo-liberalism, a context in which socio-historical political concerns are seen in capitalist terms as individual problems that have market, consumption-based solutions. Under a neo-liberal regime, individuals are interpellated as entrepreneurial actors and are seen increasingly as responsible for their own well-being. Individual choice is often used as a way of expressing this individuated agency.[22]

18. Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016); Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 'Sultana's Dream', originally published in English in *The Indian Ladies Magazine* (Madras, 1905) [https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/sultana/dream/dream.html, accessed 2 Feb. 2019]; Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (London: Virago Press, 1991) pp. 9, 11; and Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', in Mary Evans (ed.), *Feminism: Critical Concepts in Literary & Cultural Studies. Vol. II* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 17–26.
19. Hemangini Gupta, 'Taking Action: The Desiring Subjects of Neoliberal Feminism in India', in *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 17, no. 1 (2016), pp. 152–68.
20. Lata Mani, 'Towards a New Feminist Imaginary: Sex and the Signal Free Corridor', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 49, no. 6 (2014), pp. 26–9.
21. Gupta, 'Taking Action', pp. 159, 160.
22. Alison Phipps, 'Whose Personal Is More Political? Experience in Contemporary Feminist Politics', in *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 17, no. 3 (2016), pp. 303–21; Wendy Brown, 'American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization', in *Political Theory*, Vol. 34, no. 6 (2006), pp. 690–714; and Catherine Rottenberg, 'The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism', in *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 28, no. 3 (2013), pp. 418–37.

Rottenberg sees neo-liberal feminism as one that helps to 'produce a particular kind of feminist subject', one who is 'not only individualised but entrepreneurial in the sense that she is oriented towards optimising her resources though incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation'. Gender inequality, under neo-liberalism, is 'acknowledged only to be disavowed, and the question of social justice is recast in personal, individualised terms'.[23]

Are women's claims to public space neo-liberal in nature? Mani expresses no little discomfort with what she calls the 'sexuality–freedom–pleasure–danger' nexus of the modern city,[24] but, disconcertingly, her view might well be espoused by the religious Right wing as well, whose political beliefs are very different from Mani's. Scholars have pointed out in other contexts too that some feminist positions may be seen as similar to or even co-opted by Right-wing fundamentalism. Mary E. John has pointed out in relation to the Miss World contest held in Bengaluru in 1996, that the loud protests of the Right wing made it difficult to recognise the vast ideological differences between their understanding of an ossified notion of Indian culture symbolised by a desexualised womanhood, and the more nuanced feminist critique of the pageant for its relationship to consumer capitalism and beauty myths.[25] Elsewhere, writing on the attorney general's 1985 Commission on Pornography in the United States, Vance points out that the commission supported the desire to introduce aggressive anti-obscenity laws by using arguments made by anti-pornography feminists which critiqued pornography for promoting violence against and the degradation of women. Vance argues that the 'world views and underlying ideologies' of the anti-pornography feminists were 'very different' from those of the religious fundamentalists, but the fundamentalists were nonetheless able to co-opt them.[26]

However, I would argue that these suggestions that claims to public spaces are indistinguishable from neo-liberal ideologies are largely mistaken. Mani asks if we can 'oppose violence against women in public places without implicitly anchoring it in a notion of untrammelled freedom, an unrealistic presumption with little historical precedent'?[27] Mani is exactly correct here. Untrammelled freedom is indeed unrealistic. There appears, however, to be little evidence that the young and not-so-young women involved in articulating claims to public space are demanding any version of untrammelled freedom. When Neha Singh talks of micro-transformations resulting from women accessing public space for pleasure, she is locating these micro-transformations both in the self and at the same time in the self *in community with others*—the self as citizen, rather than as consumer. In *Why Loiter* as well, the embodied claims to public space are linked to ideas of citizenship within an egalitarian city. These claims are not unrestricted but framed within an understanding of a respect for diversity and

23. Rottenberg, 'The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism', pp. 421–2.
24. Mani, 'Towards a New Feminist Imaginary', p. 27.
25. Mary E. John, 'Globalisation, Sexuality and the Visual Field: Issues and Non-Issues for a Cultural Critique', in Janaki Nair and Mary E. John (eds), *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), p. 368.
26. Carole Vance, 'Negotiating Sex and Gender in the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography', in Faye Ginsberg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (eds), *Negotiating Gender in American Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1990), p. 121.
27. Mani, 'Towards a New Feminist Imaginary', p. 29.

difference—the right of different groups to the city.[28] The call is not for untrammelled freedom but for the recognition of women and other marginal people as citizens, and an acknowledgement of their legitimate claims to the public as citizens.[29] As an act, loitering assumes valency only when performed in community with others. Claims to loitering are fundamentally imagined as collective rather than individual. This sense of the collective is often missed by arguments that understand such protests as individualistic and neo-liberal.

In their refusal to accept blame for sexual violence, as conveyed in the oft-repeated Blank Noise slogan 'I Never Ask For It', these protests collectively undo the vision of the good neo-liberal consumer who assumes responsibility for herself. By exhibiting the clothing in which they were harassed, sent by women around the country, the Action Hero volunteers demand accountability from a larger society. Rather than seeing them as entrepreneurial selves, as Gupta suggests, I would argue that Action Heroes is a form of protest that invites people to join a larger collective that seeks citizenship, not consumption, reversing the gaze rather than courting it. Another campaign, known as 'I Wish I May', asked women to express their desires in relation to public space, offering them a chance to imagine a future city they could live in. All of these invitations ask women to imagine visions of utopia that are reminiscent of Hossain's 'Sultana's Dream'. In our workshops as well, we asked students to imagine their own urban utopias—imaginings which, we believed, would be the bedrock of change and even, potentially, revolution. When read together, these visions of utopia form not individual but collective dreams for a more equitable city.

In a carefully nuanced analysis of the Why Loiter Movement, K. Frances Lieder argues that the group 'inhabits the very definition of the performative'. The women hope their presence and the conversations they have with various people, including the police, will 'normalise' women's loitering presence in public, thus making the space more comfortable even for those not involved in the project. Lieder suggests that it is their invisibility that makes their actions political. She refutes the assertion that it is impossible to differentiate desires and pleasures 'inculcated by neoliberal governmentality' from those that 'directly contest the inequalities of neoliberalism'. She contends that seeing the Why Loiter Movement and other similar groups as performances might help people to understand their work more precisely: 'Performance turns what could otherwise be construed as a claim to individual pleasure … into a collective struggle for a different kind of access and acceptance in the public sphere of the neoliberal city'.[30]

Indeed, it seems rather ironic to suggest that claiming public space is neo-liberal, as most neo-liberal urban visions foreground a sanitised, orderly city that includes neither loitering nor protesting citizens hanging out in public. If anything, the neo-liberal desire appears to be an escape from the messiness of the public. To loiter in defiance of this is to disrupt the desirable features of the global neo-liberal city. To claim the streets in a neo-liberal world is to counter the suggestion that all of us would be far more

28. Here we drew on the work of the philosopher Iris Marion Young. See Iris Marion Young, 'City Life and Difference', in Philip Kasinitz (ed.), *Metropolis: Center and Symbol of Our Times* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 250–70.
29. Phadke, Khan and Ranade, *Why Loiter*?
30. K. Frances Lieder, 'Performing Loitering: Feminist Protest in the City', in *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 62, no. 3 (2018), pp. 150, 156, 160.

productive sitting in a coffee shop or hanging out in a mall instead of wasting time doing nothing particular on the streets.[31] When one wanders or loiters on the streets, it is likely that one is not consuming anything, at most a cup of tea at a roadside stall. In addressing the ways in which loitering disrupts the global order, we wrote:

> The presence of the loiterer acts to rupture the controlled socio-cultural order of the global city by refusing to conform to desired forms of movement and location and instead creating alternate maps of movement, and thus new kinds of everyday interaction …. The liminality of loitering is seen as an act of contamination, defiling space. Loitering is a reminder of what is perceived as the lowest common denominator of the local and thus is a threat to the desired image of a global city: sanitized, glamorous and homogenous. Loitering then as a subversive activity has the potential to raise questions not just of 'desirable image' but of citizenship: Who owns the city? Who can access city public spaces as a right?[32]

Claiming the public, then, is an act compatible with claiming citizenship and a negation of the imperative to be a consumer.

All three campaigns are comprised of actors inhabiting and thus writing the city with their bodies—not the docile bodies of neo-liberal consumers but the rebellious bodies of women who refuse to stay within limits defined by a patriarchal culture. There is certainly a pleasure in reclaiming this denied public, and reclaiming it not as the purposeful productive good consumers of neo-liberal capitalism, but as loitering, protesting, street-tea-drinking, twenty-first-century feminists and citizens.

Gatekeeping feminist politics

Feminist campaigns in India over the last three decades have pushed the boundaries of feminist language and organising. An explicitly class-based socialist feminism of the 1970s and 1980s spawned multiple forms of articulation in the 1990s and the first decades of the twenty-first century. These forms of articulation have led to a lively debate within feminism with regard to questions of ideology, methods and efficacy. A liberal discourse of human rights has allowed for widely accepted and acceptable feminist claims for educational, economic and political participation. However, the demand for fun sits uneasily in relation to those more established claims. It may often be seen not just as frivolous, but also as undermining the seriousness of the feminist project itself, perhaps even threatening the more 'legitimate claims' for social and political equity. As Nivedita Menon puts it, (even) sexuality is low on the 'hierarchy of oppressions'.[33]

There is also some discomfort with the form that the politics of fun has taken. Gupta tacitly privileges forms of organising such as 'rallies, sit-ins, petitions' in contrast to what she calls 'fragmented and spectacular forms of public intervention'.[34] This discomfort extends to digital feminisms as well. One campaign that was particularly contentious was the Pink Chaddi Campaign (PCC). In January 2009, a group of women eating and drinking at a Mangaluru pub were attacked by Right-wing goons belonging

31. This is not intended to undermine women's desires to hang out in malls, coffee shops and restaurants.
32. Phadke, Khan and Ranade, 'Why Loiter?', p. 196.
33. Nivedita Menon, 'How Natural Is Normal? Feminism and Compulsory Heterosexuality', in Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (eds), *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005), p. 33.
34. Gupta, 'Taking Action', p. 156.

to an outfit called the Sri Ram Sene who saw them as desecrating Indian culture. The Mangaluru attacks were followed by the creation of an unusual and irreverent social media group, the Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women, by journalist Nisha Susan. Overnight the group had tens of thousands of members, myself included. The intent behind the creation of this group was both to challenge the Right-wing vision of what constitutes Indian culture and also, I would argue, to assert that it was perfectly acceptable for women to hang out in pubs and have a good time if that is what they want to do. This social media group was trolled and later hacked into and had to be shut down. However, it was followed by an irreverent campaign called the PCC that invited women to send pink underwear to the Sri Ram Sene as a Valentine's Day gift.

While the Mangaluru attacks took place inside a private restaurant rather than in public space, the feminist debates around the PCC are nonetheless relevant to the ways in which gatekeeping around feminism has intensified in the recent past. The PCC is arguably India's first protest campaign that began online. Its online origins have been treated with some suspicion by feminists, with the suggestion that its digital form limits participation, making it inherently elitist. Furthermore, it is often accused of endorsing alcohol despite various people associated with it explicitly stating that the aim was to challenge a unilateral definition of Indian culture rather than to advocate any one means of doing so.[35] Both Mani and Gupta see the PCC as a neo-liberal form of protest, with Mani expressing concern about the connections between alcohol consumption and freedom, and Gupta suggesting that the very name of the group, Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women, marks it as frivolous and individualistic, focussing on the members rather than the cause.[36] Tejaswini Niranjana refutes these criticisms, arguing that the PCC can no more be seen as an 'assertion of pro-globalisation forces' than the earlier campaigns of the women's movement can be 'dismissed as Western inspired'.[37] She moreover suggests that the sexually-charged idiom of the PCC may have contributed to some feminists' discomfort with it. Ratna Kapur argues that the PCC is not anti-feminist or non-feminist, but is a response to what she calls the 'over-determined emphasis on male sexual violence and female victimisation' by 'dominance feminism', so shifting the language of feminism to that of 'autonomy, sexual integrity and pleasure'.[38] Kapur sees the PCC as an example of 'feminism lite', not revolutionary but rather a part of 'powerful critiques of dominant feminist positions' which might create spaces for other kinds of feminist possibilities and analyses.[39] Hester Baer, engaging with digital feminisms in Germany, similarly argues that digital feminist protests enable intersectional conversations and represent a 'provocative and risky space for emergent feminist politics', signalling a shift away from legal recourse and the language of equality and rights. Baer recognises that the

35. See, for instance, Nisha Susan, 'Why We Said Pants to India's Bigots', *The Guardian* (15 Feb. 2009) [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/feb/15/india-gender, accessed 24 Sept. 2019].
36. Mani, 'Towards a New Feminist Imaginary'; and Gupta, 'Taking Action'.
37. Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Why Culture Matters: Rethinking the Language of Feminist Politics', in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 11, no. 2 (2010), p. 233.
38. Ratna Kapur, 'Pink Chaddis and SlutWalk Couture: The Postcolonial Politics of Feminism Lite', in *Legal Studies*, Vol. 20, no. 1 (2012), pp. 4, 11.
39. *Ibid*., p. 3.

'microrebellions' of digital feminism seem to 'work in concert with neoliberal subjectivities', but suggests we understand this in relation to 'the changed political function of the female within both digital mediascapes and street protests'.[40] Kapur, Niranjana and Baer, separately and in different ways, gesture towards challenges being mounted to twentieth-century feminisms as also signalling shifts in forms of protest and embodied politics.

The early part of this century saw fewer women openly identifying with feminism, in part because they see it as austere or even joyless.[41] However, today, there is a small but visible group of women claiming feminism both on the streets and online. In a context where women are beginning to claim feminism and make it their own, a response from other feminists which can be roughly summarised as 'You are doing it wrong' closes off a dialogue before it can even begin.

What such critiques display is not just an anxiety around what counts as feminism, but also a search for a pure form of politics. For young and not-so-young women today, especially those who live in cities, there is little escape from globalisation and globalised contexts, and it is from these contexts that they will largely launch their feminism. Dismissing forms of protest as neo-liberal, or indeed marking them as good or bad feminism, achieves little in terms of understanding a constantly shifting discourse of feminism. In fact, it can be argued that it is precisely feminist positions that do *not* recognise pleasure/fun as legitimate or desirable that create a space for the neo-liberal market to become the representative for modernity and choice, offering new forms of conformity in place of transformative politics. Where feminisms are judged as too hedonistic, too individualistic and, in the subtext I read, too much fun to be truly feminist (for feminist activism is a serious business), certain forms of articulation are deemed illegitimate and unworthy.

Concluding reflections

The question is not whether we should debate feminist ideologies and politics—we must; the capacity to negotiate, debate and even disagree is what sets progressive movements apart from other ideologies. The more relevant questions are: Are we willing to see feminism as a fluid, pluralistic, inclusive politics and movement that can hold space for different forms of organising and articulation within the larger framework of social justice? Are we willing to trouble our own ideas of what a progressive and effective feminist politics might look like in the twenty-first century? If we can see fun as political, we might be able to trouble our ideas of what feminist activism and organising should look like. Fun's very contentiousness makes it imperative that we engage with it. If we can see that the ostensibly frivolous might in fact hold new possibilities well worth thinking about, we might ask different questions about its connection to feminist organising. If we can see fun as serious, certainly to be debated, but nonetheless relevant to a feminist politics of transformation, we will find ourselves in the middle of a

40. Hester Baer, 'Redoing Feminism: Digital Activism, Body Politics, and Neoliberalism', in *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 16, no. 1 (2016), p. 18. There has also been sustained debate within feminism globally around digital feminisms and their implications for feminist politics and organising.

41. Phadke, Ranade and Khan, 'Why Loiter?'; and Shilpa Phadke, 'Risking Feminism: Voices from the Classroom', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. L, no. 17 (2015), pp. 63–70.

conversation that is messy and often full of potholes, much like the streets in which women want to wander, but also just as exciting.

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