

CASTE CLUSTER IN TAJ CITY

People are geographical beings. The spaces we live in are living breathing social histories of our lived realities, struggles of our ancestors, our hopes and dreams for the future. Spaces actively evolve with the process of being inhabited, utilised and experienced by communities. Spaces and communities share a co-dependent relationship where they affect and are affected by each other. It is a long-held belief in the theories of urban history that a space is created by the confluence of infrastructure and the communities living in it. A place is not merely created but is constructed over time by the people inhabiting, co-opting and actively participating in social and cultural circles. The cartographical process of sketching digital twins of physical spaces often fails to comprehend the role of communities in creating a city and the non-quantifiable aspects that they bring with themselves. This essay will attempt to perceive the city through one such non-quantifiable aspect that shapes the lives of a community inhabiting a physical space. This essay aims to understand the city of Agra through the lens of caste which is a defining characteristic of Hindu societies. This essay will observe an area of Agra, a city in North India famous for the Taj Mahal, called *Gobar Chowki*¹ which is populated by the Dalit community. It will analyse the way the community of *Gobar Chowki* utilise the space they reside in, the metaphoric implication of design and architecture of the area, the integration of public spaces in identity formation and the trajectory of people that correspond with the evolution of this Dalit neighbourhood.

Gobar Chowki, situated only a kilometre away from the world-famous Taj Mahal, is accessed by a descending slope from the main road. The descent measures approximately six feet and is located opposite a luxury hotel in the city, however due to the descent only a small

¹ Please visit [this link](#) for reference photographs

portion of *Gobar Chowki* is visible from the main road before it diverges into its serpentine alleys. The rocky slope, which was cemented only a year ago, becomes symbolic of the community living in the area and their social status. *Gobar Chowki* is a Dalit neighbourhood populated by *Jatavs*, who form a sub-caste of *Chamars*. *Chamars* were traditionally assigned the job of disposing dead cattle owned by upper castes. The *chamars* gradually started treating cattle skin and producing leather out of it. Owing to the meagre working condition in tanning factories, a distinct foul smell came to be associated with the *Chamars* which then became symbolic of their position at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. On the same lines, *Gobar Chowki* was used as a resting area for pack animals used during the construction of the Taj Mahal in the 15th century. The animals and their remains infused the area with a stench that became a defining feature of the it. The locality ultimately began to be known as *Gobar Chowki*, which literally translates to a crossroad of dung. Historically, residential segregation has been an important aspect of caste-based discrimination in India. The lower caste communities resided in hamlets far removed from upper caste villages and were restricted to even leave their footprints in areas that did not belong to them. During the industrial and urbanisation boom in post-independence India, residential segregation converted into ghettoization of lower caste communities in newly formed cities of modern India. The ostracised households of rural India formed the densely packed locality in cities and social hierarchies replicated themselves in a concrete institutionalised form. *Isolated by Caste*, a paper studying residential segregation in India cities, comments that “caste-based residential segregation further contributes to widening of social and cognitive distances between caste groups. Social hierarchies are reinforced by spatial isolation and separation.”² *Gobar Chowki* is testament of this view as the entire area aesthetically and socially remains outside the bounds

² Andaleeb Rahman, Deepak Malghan, Naveen Bharathi, ‘Isolated by Caste: Neighbourhood-Scale Residential Segregation in Indian Metros’, *Working Paper Cornell University*, (2018), 1-22 (p 4)

of the development wave engulfing the city. Even the plans to turn Agra into a ‘smart city’ loosely mention the upgradation of areas around the Taj Mahal but fail to comprehend the politics and social histories of areas like *Gobar Chowki* that have taken the shape of urban ghettos. Furthermore, the immediate understanding of the entry slope can be interpreted as metaphorical barrier to access of space and consequently to the limiting of agency. Discussing ideas of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, Dolores Hayden contends that “one of the consistent ways to limit the economic and political rights of groups has been to contain social reproduction by limiting access to space.”³ The mentioned slope is dug up regularly which renders it obsolete in providing an entrance to the area, the alternate access is another uncemented steep slope located beside an open sewage drain, and the entry from the opposite end of the area is complex network of alleys that culminate into rear exits of either hotels or banquet halls. During the monsoon season, the slopes turn to sludge which physically restricts the movement of the residents from within and outside. Thus, the intermingling of communities is obstructed by the architecture of the space as well as the social implications of it and further alienates the residing community from participating in the public life of the city. Jeff Malpas, in his book *Place and Experience*, propounds that one of the important aspects of thinking about place is imagining it as “possessed of enough breadth and space to allow room for oneself within it- room enough to allow an engagement with the world.”⁴ He further says that place should be “positioned” in a manner that facilitates interaction with places surrounding it. In *Gobar Chowki*, the literal translation of the lower and upper caste dynamic into the design of the place not only restricts movement but also relegates an invisibility to the place. The area remains beyond observable sight from the main road and is further clouded by

³ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscape as Public History* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 1995) p.22

⁴ Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (London, New York: Routledge, 2018) p. 33

the tall buildings and complexes constructed on either side of the entrance. This invisibility extends to the residing community as the strategic isolation makes it impossible for them to participate in urban life and the development that accompanies it.

The entry slope gradually unfurls into serpentine alleys with houses built on both sides and multifarious businesses functioning inside. As mentioned earlier, the early residents tanned leather in the area and supplied it to the markets. Gradually, *Jatavs* learned the art of shoemaking and began handcrafting leather shoes that later became a native speciality of the city. Till today, the *Jatav* community remains the biggest manufacturers of leather shoes in the city, however the suppliers are mostly people from upper caste communities. The factories and living quarters often find coexistence in this area. A lot of houses are bifurcated into residential spaces and the rest is converted into a fully functioning factory where as many as thirty people work at a time. It is a usual phenomenon in the area to witness two doors of the same house serving different purposes- one as an entry to the living space and the other as a small shop selling daily essentials. Here people do not necessarily dress for work and only have to walk over either to the other room or the house two doors away to get to work. It is also a usual sight to see women with crying babies in their arms manning shops and tending to their domestic responsibilities simultaneously. Such intimate intermingling of living and professional spaces is symbolic on two levels. The house has always held unique importance in the discussions surrounding self and memory. The idea of the house is associated with profound emotions of protection and intimacy. Gaston Bachelard writes that “before he is cast into the world...man is laid in the cradle of the house”⁵ which consolidates the image of the house as a sheltered place where human beings initiate their interactions with the world. The house essentially is a facilitator in the process of constituting a being and forming an identity

⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) p.7

in relation to the world. The formed being continues to evolve through experience and create memories that are ossified in the inhabited space of the house. The house, then, can be imagined as a composite structure of lived history and memories that help new members find their roots and place in the world. The land in *Gobar Chowki* is majorly ancestral that has been handed down to younger generations and has sheltered generations of a family. The houses are doused with historical and social significance that introduces the succeeding generations to the pretext of their identities as members of the Dalit community and their shared struggles. The existence of an overlapping professional space in the territory of the living space can be perceived as an intrusion to the harmony of self and identity. The coexistence of houses and factories in the same infrastructure symbolises the intervention of the market in familial relationships and further re-orientates the basis of identity from the sheltered sense of home to the nature of labour work and relationships of the market. *Jatavs* form the working proletariat in the shoe market of the city while the ownership of the means of production remains with members of various upper castes. The hegemony of the upper caste in the market functions as barrier in economic as well as social advancement of the shoe making labourers who continues to be hired on contractual basis and work in poorly managed factory setups. Additionally, the outsourcing of the finished products to upper caste business owners alienates the *Jatavs* from their labour while also removing them from the profit-making aspect of the industry. In the upper caste ownership of the means of production, the lower caste proletariat owns only its labour power. The recognition of *Jatavs* as shoemakers is a continuation of nomenclature prevalent in Hindu society where many communities are named after the work they do that also extends to the name of their caste. On a second level, the closely shared territory of the house and factory corresponds to the founding principle of caste hierarchy in Hindu society which is work. The four varnas elucidated in the scriptures have clearly defined roles to play in society. In the decreasing order of hierarchy, the *Brahmins* are proliferators of knowledge,

Kshatriyas are warriors and protectors, *Vaishyas* are farmers and traders, *Shudras* are labourers, and the outcasted Dalits who are sweepers and sanitation workers who form the lowest rung. The believed image of the Dalits as arising from beneath the feet of the ultimate creator organically banished them from settlements of the upper caste members and consigned them cleaning work that ranged from disposing dead animals to clearing human faeces with bare hands. The urbanisation of city spaces carried a possibility of transgressing orthodox caste dictates for people who suffered social and economic disadvantages in the hierarchy. However, reproduction of caste hierarchy in cities through spatial isolation and hegemonic control over the market crushed the hopes of growth in marginalised groups.

The houses in *Gobar Chowki* connote a deep sense of communal and self awareness. The houses are vested social awareness through the trajectory of people who have inhabited it. These houses have become brick and mortar from thatched roofs by generations of families motivated to build a space of their own. These self-built spaces are a means to secure pride in a society that has denied the Dalit community a respectful place in its social circle. Most houses are engraved with stones that carry the family name which in Hindu society reflect the caste one belongs to. The surnames which would be the cause of debasement in the society across the city are carried on stones with pride in this area. Five years ago, a stone insignia was erected on the entry slope that bore the name of the first shoemaker and designer of the area. A man of humble achievement but great character was chosen as a symbol for everything the community believes it stands for and aspires towards. The christening of the entryway became a way for the community to nurture dreams for the future, to take pride in their craft and build character of fortitude to fight for repute in the society. Hence, carving the family name in stone became a way for families to embrace their history and in turn take pride in their work and existence. Gaston Bachelard envisions the concept of dwelling through a convoluted process of daydreaming, memory and imagination. He propounds that the relationship of the dwelling

and dwellers is reciprocal. While the dwellers receive shelter for their thoughts and experiences, the dwelling is constructed simultaneously in the process as a complex structure of personal memory, images and dreams. This process of daydreaming is self-aware of the past it has inherited and interprets it in a way that facilitates narrative of the days to come. The houses of *Gobar Chowki* are inhabited with sense of struggle shared by all the residing families, however their outer aesthetics display distinct individuality. In the present time, the houses are painted with eye-catching bright colours and are sometimes embellished with distinctive designs. The attention to aesthetics in these houses bestows them a personality that becomes reflective of the people dwelling in them and their desire to be seen. The act of building these dwellings allows the dwellers an agency that is unreachable to them in the larger sphere of society. The agency functions as a tool for them to be in control of their narratives, the way they want their stories to be told and to re-orient their narrative from being one of oppression to a trajectory of courageous individuals embracing the historical struggle of their ancestors for social recognition. A glimpse of the houses so full of aspirational aesthetics generates in the observer a desire to know the stories of the structure. There is no architectural element that embodies the consciousness of stories wanting to be discovered more than a door. Simon Unwin believes that “we read doorways like we read faces”⁶ and an open door emanates a welcoming appeal to uncover its stories. As a boundary between the outside and inside, doors are an entryway into the lives of people residing inside. Doorways enclose within the inside of the house its essence, smells, and all symbols of lives breathing inside. In this area of the city, one will find doors always open wide as long as the daylight lasts before sunset. With the intercepting alley between opposing lanes of houses only around two-feet wide, the open doors on either side create a welcoming sense of a free interaction of ideas and lives. The open doorways can often be seen with elderly ladies sitting in groups recounting stories they have

⁶ Simon Unwin, *Doorway* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007) p. 206

shared with each other a thousand times, exchanging quips in their regional dialect, or loudly shouting blessing at residents stopping to greet them as generally happens in neighbourhoods where everybody knows each other. A lot of open doors are seen with women working on small elements of the shoemaking process while men work in clusters next door. The open doors personify the familiarity and welcoming spirit of *Gobar Chowki*. Each door, while radiating the same welcoming warmth, offers the observer a distinguishing sensory experience with sounds of a bustling shop running in a corner or labourers working in the adjoining room, smells of different meals cooking in the kitchen or of products being manufactures in the factories, visuals of insides decorated with differing aesthetic sensibilities, and the feel of personalised design on the doors and walls displaying individuality constructed through a shared sense of community. The sensory experience of entering such doorways manifests into a metaphoric introduction to the quintessence of lives of the Dalit community aspiring towards personal and social advancement. The sense of a house and its elements being more than a structure is echoed in the ideas of Rowan Moore who dissects the close relationship between architecture and desire. He comments that “buildings are intermediaries in the reciprocation between hopes and intentions of people, in the present and the past. They are the mineral interval between the thoughts and actions that make them and the thoughts and actions that inhabit them.”⁷ In the last decade there has been considerable vertical rise of the structures located in *Gobar Chowki*. With finances saved over the years and approachable loan schemes of the banking system, many residents have added multi-storeys to their houses. The multiple layers of some houses have enabled them to come on eye-level to the rest of the city and through their roofs they have convenient visible access to the entire city which is otherwise inaccessible to them in various ways discussed earlier in the essay. The vertical rise, if

⁷ Rowan Moore, *Why We Build: Power and Desire in Architecture* (New York: Harper Design, 2013) p. 21

perceived as growing from beneath the ground, can be equated to a claim to power. Rowan Moore argues that “architecture is intimate with power. It requires authority, money, and ownership. To build is to exert power...”⁸ and in this case since the work of building is not outsourced to a professional architect but is handled by the owner, the association of power is more direct. The residents acting as architects to build their houses culminates into an intricate structure shaped from their ideologies, history, dreams and desire. The process of erecting such symbolically complex structures assimilates social, economic and culture power for a community that has historically been sequestered from it. The power and individuality infused in these structures illustrates social mobility in a society based on hierarchy of caste and class. A tall building might look intimidating or inspiring depending on its context, the Taj Mahal is an effective example of understanding the duality. The ruling Mughal emperor, Shahjahan, had thousands of labourers constructing his dream vision. After the physical manifestation of the vision was complete, the emperor ordered his forces to sever the hands of the labourers who worked on the building so they would not attempt to replicate his art. Thus, the Taj Mahal which is widely regarded as a monument of love is tainted with the blood of people who converted a vision into a work of art. Contrastingly, houses in *Gobar Chowki* were envisioned and constructed by the same people who inhabit them which makes them aspirational structures symbolising resilience, hard work and joys of communal living. The magnificence of the vertical rise in *Gobar Chowki*, thus, is a positive growth of not only a single community but towards a society that has space and accessibility for all.

The accessibility and appropriation of space is further consolidated through the public spaces of the area. A marketplace and a park, accompanied by the narrow alleys, function as shared spaces to congress and celebrate various festivals within the community. As a community that was outcasted to the margins socially and spatially, the access to public spaces

⁸ Rowan Moore, *Why We Build*, p. 157

becomes an important barrier to overcome in acquiring equality in the society. Public spaces in Dalit communities bring together genealogical knowledge which is embraced and celebrated with pride. Public spaces create an opportunity for the community to re-centre the idea of dignity from Brahmanical dictates to Dalit experience and struggle that generates a purpose in their lives. A statue of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar is installed in the park of the area - a sight characteristic of all Dalit neighbourhoods. Dr Ambedkar for the community is not only an intellectual of grand proportions but also a symbol representative of the past, present and future. Dr Ambedkar's struggle to achieve political representation for Dalits and including them in the discourse of nation formation is considered as the genesis of Dalit consciousness and movements associated with it. The community's present is guided by the exhortation of Dr Ambedkar to 'educate, agitate and organise' the masses about the experiences of being a Dalit and the way the society needs to be reformed to give Dalits the opportunities, inclusion and dignity they have been denied. The Dalit community's future is based on the vision of Dr Ambedkar to rid the Hindu society of the evils of caste discrimination and uproot the social order guided by Hindu religious discourses. It is in spirit of Dr Ambedkar's genius that every year on the fourteenth of April a parade is organised in the area with tableaux representing Dalit pride and a classic image of him holding the Indian constitution with a finger pointing forwards. The tableaux are accompanied by cohorts of Dalit youth chanting 'Jai Bhim' and showcased in the entire city. The statue of Dr Ambedkar and its presence in public spaces in every Dalit neighbourhood is a method for the community to symbolically appropriate space to restore the past and preserve its memories. The act of installing symbols particularly associated with their identities is a way to nourish the imagination of the Dalit youth and invigorate the Dalit movement across the country. This communal space in *Gobar Chowki* is often used for communal gatherings where internal issues are resolved, weddings and functions are organised, the deceased are commemorated and days important for the

community specially those related to Dr Ambedkar's life are celebrated together. This space functions as a mode of remembrance for the community to stay connected with their roots and a mutually managed space where they shape their narrative and the way it needs to be told to the outside world. In addition to the park, narrow alleys yield into a robust marketplace. The market of the area is fundamentally an open space where locals either set-up their small carts or can be seen on the floor with commodities lined in front of them. The marketplace serves as the prime service provider and a communal space with uninterrupted flow of bodies and identities. The market with its bustling energy functions as a space where identities merge with each other and the only hierarchy that remains is of the buyer and the seller. Since most of the buyers and sellers know each other in this market, the hierarchy is left untouched by domination and is operated with a friendly disposition. While the park operates as a space where identities are stabilised and reinforced, the marketplace allows for a blurring of identities where one can feel a connection with the crowd at large. The market, thus, offers a democratised approach where it is not only difficult to differentiate between people but also establish concrete boundaries to stop the influx of identities. The disruption of social order deeply entrenched in society afforded by market spaces makes them crucial architecture in the formation of modern democracies. Caste as an organising principle in many Indian cities is founded on clear distinction of boundaries which stabilise the social order. Contrastingly, market spaces form a heterotopia that enables close encounters of communities otherwise separated by the pure-impure dynamic of the caste system. Samrat Sengupta comments that such amalgamation of identities "challenges the isotopy of the space and moves towards the unknown and the undecidable concatenation and assemblage of people and their stories."⁹ The market as the second communal space in *Gobar Chowki* engenders an opportunity to overcome

⁹ Samrat Sengupta, 'Undecidable Spaces: Rethinking Caste and the Technologies of Abandonment in Manoranjan Byapari', *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 6:1 (2019), 64-77, p. 74

caste subjugation. Caste discourses in India are replete with a fear of being touched by the lower caste associated with a certain impurity. The spatial seclusion allows for the smell, sight and impurity of the “untouchable” bodies to disappear from the pristine centres of the upper castes. A space where every semblance of barrier is unable to function becomes a deciding factor in creating inclusive urban landscapes that eradicate predominant discriminatory practices and more importantly allow the marginalised residents to overcome the sense of being “lower” and enjoy the freedom of movement in a communal area. The cultural currency of the park and the market in *Gobar Chowki* is accentuated by the serpentine alleys present across the area like veins in a body. One needs to undertake a complex network of tight alleys to reach the park as well as the market. Roads and alleys are cohesive elements that serve the utilitarian purpose of allowing access to the city and its spaces. However, they perform the symbolic function of a channel that invites one to engage with the many families they connect. The alleys, in particular, are “an opportunity to establish character, emphasise placemaking and provide social spaces for the community.”¹⁰ The alleys in *Gobar Chowki* were cemented only a couple of years ago and were initially only dirt roads. The cementing process made the alleys safer for two-wheelers to pass, eased the passage of vendors with small wooden carts and simultaneously gave the area an appeal of development. The houses in the area directly open into the alley without the interference of entrance gates (a common feature in affluent neighbourhoods) which gives a certain character to the alleys being closely woven into the residential fabric of the community. The distinct character is underscored by the doubling up of the alleys as gathering spaces. The alleys are repurposed as playing grounds for children of the area who can be easily monitored by elders due to the close proximity of houses and are often used as spaces to either mutually mourn during funeral processions or collectively

¹⁰ Graham Smith, *The Advantages of Alleys* (2018)
<https://www.bdcnetwork.com/blog/advantages-alleys#> [accessed 01 November 2020]

celebrate during parades of festivals. The alleys also possess a dual nature of dividing and combining. The interval of alleys between spaces allows the formation of urban rooms that come to acquire a subjective character of their own. At the same time, the coursing of alleys through distinctive spaces helps in integrating them under a cohesive structure of a city. In this particular locality, the alleys flow through the entire stretch while being interpreted in various ways for the residents but serving an equivocal purpose of connecting the residents and enabling formation of identity through interaction with all the elements that form *Gobar Chowki*.

Urban spaces have a language of their own. This language is a confluence of human-made vocabulary and “the system of social signifiers - the series of practices, beliefs, mores, rites, norms or the different ways of living.”¹¹ The dissection of various elements that form urban spaces reveal the beliefs of communities living in them and unchallenged ideas that have structured their social lives. Agra and its locality, *Gobar Chowki*, is an effective case study to understand the way in which social and cultural power dynamic is cloned in the physical space of the city. Gopal Guru explains this dynamic through the space of a tormentor and the victim. He propounds that “the tormentor reconfigures spaces accordingly, so as to seek the ultimate regulation of the victim into hegemony and domination of the former” and in turn the victims utilise their spatial experience to collectively mobilise “for altering, annihilating, and transcending spaces that are otherwise quite dominating.”¹² The co-option of public spaces and the obtrusive customisation of living spaces highlight the transcending tendency of the Dalit community in *Gobar Chowki* to disrupt the social order and create a space of dignity for themselves. The spatial awareness in *Gobar Chowki* engages all the senses which correspond

¹¹ Samrat Sengupta, ‘Undecidable Spaces’, p. 65

¹² Gopal Guru, ‘Experience, Space, Justice’, in *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, ed. by Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (India: Oxford University Press, 2012) pp. 71-106

to particular aspects of the lives of the residing community, formulating a knowledge of the margins. The structure of the houses, the entryway, the alleys, and the public spaces carry symbolic meaning that needs to be decoded in order to expose the different levels of experience of a space inhabited, co-opted and actively transformed by a community. The stories, history, narrative and growth of the Dalit community is mirrored in the physical evolution of *Gobar Chowki* creating a tapestry to understand the urban social history of this caste cluster in the Taj city.