

Making-Home From Below: Domesticating Footpath and Resisting “Homelessness” in Mumbai

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Abstract: Drawing upon ethnography among footpath dwellers in Mumbai this paper argues that hegemonic ideas and practices of urban inhabitation constrain subaltern visions of home as well as public space. In doing so, it warrants an ontology of urban inhabitation that transcends occupancy politics. It is not just the neoliberal state and property-entrenching capital but also the politics of inclusion that fragments subaltern subjectivities of belonging and dispossession. By highlighting everyday practices, particularly the use of footwear, food preparation and consumption, performance of modesty, and rearing of pets, I articulate two ways in which *home* is experienced and *homelessness* is resisted through claims where interlocutors have no spatial legitimacy: by (re)producing spatial and moral boundaries and practising multiple mobilities that enable transient domesticities. This paper thus provides an expanded sense of home that moves beyond the materialities of home making, and binaries of the “private” interior and “public” exterior.

Keywords: home, homelessness, public domesticities, street life, Mumbai

Introduction: Ordinary Spectacles of Domesticity

The shadow of the leaves on the railway station’s wall suggests the approach of dawn on Mumbai’s streets. I notice Deepali (name changed) is sitting on the road adjacent to the footpath she inhabits, under the shade provided by a line of drying clothes, washing utensils with water collected in a blue jerry-can (Figure 1). The bamboo poles hold the washing line, on which is also hung a black plastic bag containing the ingredients that will be used to prepare *ghar-ka-khana* (home-food). A little distance two colourful bedsheets hanging from the temporarily placed bamboo structures catch my eye. The bedsheets have been drawn closed to mark an intimate enclosure that cannot be invaded by the prying eyes of the passers-by. This is where, I am told, couples regularly take turns spending intimate moments while the rest of the family sleeps on the space between the carriage-way and the footpath. The heap of dried bamboo and provisionally-processed bamboo strips that surrounds Deepali reveals a key contradiction that the footpath is not just an appropriated space or even temporary shelter but a place that has been domesticated and personalised.



Figure 1: Everyday domestic life on the footpath (source: author, fieldwork 2018)

I present this scene to draw attention to the ubiquitous domesticities that animate life on Mumbai's footpaths (Ravindran 2016; Tatke 2013), and to demonstrate how the footpath—an inherently public space—has been personalised, lending a specific publicness to the intimate space of “home”. Menon (2010:152) describes pavement-dwellers in Mumbai as abject, devoid of any political subjectivity, and thriving at the lowest strata within the urban poverty hierarchy as they “cannot live in slum settlements and must carve out a space on the pavements of the city to house themselves”. The public character of the footpath impedes an overt politics of “occupancy” (Benjamin 2008). Yet domestic functions and social relations thrive around it. The domestication of the footpath, an infrastructure meant to regulate public movement, is not an aberration but presents possible alternatives to the totalising discourse of planned urbanity (Bandyopadhyay 2017; Björkman 2015; Blomley 2010; Ghertner 2015; Menon 2013; Moatasim 2019). Claims to public space through street-hawking and footpath-dwelling are not dystopias but rather “widely accepted” and ubiquitous features of South Asian cities that often thrive as tolerated informality (Anand 2011; Anjaria 2016; Bandyopadhyay 2017, 2022; Menon 2013; Moatasim 2019; Rao 2013). These domesticities do not necessarily resonate with conventional understandings of home, rather they exemplify how the street is central to people's experiences of home. In highlighting the embodiment of home-making in the public, *making-home from below*, provides an expanded sense of home that moves beyond the materialities of

home making, and anachronistic binaries of the “private” interior and “public” exterior. In doing so, it demonstrates how people simultaneously navigate being unhomed from spaces they regard as their home.

This work is a result of a “long-term” engagement with footpath and street dwelling groups in Mumbai that predates and draws from my PhD fieldwork. Following Lancione (2022:1143), I phrase this work as transcending “fieldwork” in the way it addresses the “disjunctures between the timing of academic production” and the time required to reflect on the historical, social and political processes. This paper is a result of an evolving analytical framing, tied to the changes in my own positionalities from a community organiser, employee of an INGO, to a student affiliated to a global North higher education institution. My early engagement with interlocutors was influenced by a developmental narrative wherein those inhabiting the streets and pavements were perceived to be passive victims of societal inequalities who needed to be “rescued”. Over time, I realised that people referred to their living spaces on the footpath as *ghar* (home) and their everyday practices such as cooking, cleaning, generating income, socialising, caring, and even setting boundaries were centred around this notional and material organisation of their home. References to domesticities was punctuated with mentions of how they protected themselves from extreme weather events, circumvented municipal action or calibrated risks from fast-moving vehicles. Although living on the street came with immense hardships, it was nonetheless their “home” and they certainly did not consider themselves *beghar* (lacking a home), a term favourably used by activists and pro-poor NGOs in India, which resonates with Western conceptualisations of homelessness. Thus, they emphasise that practices of home are not necessarily sites of comfort and safety, and that home need not be materialised within four walls. It is these evolving nature of interactions with community members, officials in positions of power, everyday state actors, and urban planners that have helped me make sense of the historical and social processes that shaped the politics of making-home in Mumbai. The ethnography presented here involved 130 footpath dwellers residing in the neighbourhood of Masinpada (name changed), ten in-depth interviews with housing activists and local municipality staff, and an analysis of official documents ranging from municipal records, encroachment removal circulars, official handbooks specifying roles and responsibilities of duty bearers, court judgements, national policies on street vending, and planning documents.

Within South Asian urban scholarship (and official discourse), limited attention has been paid to the spatial politics of urban dwellers who are outside “the territoriality of the slum” (Jones and Sanyal 2015:433). Scholarship that focuses on street-dwellers either recognises these groups as homeless or as economic actors functioning informally (Anjaria 2016; Bayat 2000; Moatasim 2019). This paper calls attention towards groups whose connections with the street go beyond economic activities, and whose persistent practices of staking claims to space exist not as spatial exceptions, but as ubiquitous features of the urban. As a crucial urban infrastructure and arena of political expression, the making of home on the footpath offers an alternative reading to subaltern spatial politics. Making-home from below, as the title of my paper suggests, transcends the occupation of

public spaces for private purposes. Countering the hegemony of urban housing, it refers to the persistent ways by which dispossessed inhabitants reconfigure the insidious effects of neoliberal city transformation through domestication in spaces over which they have no spatial legitimacy. *Below* is not just a spatial marker to suggest domestic practices at the street level, but acts as a metaphor to underscore dwelling by the marginalised that subvert not just accepted ways of urban inhabitation but also *being* in public spaces.

In the following sections, I critique the idea of “home” theorised as a physical space that is interior and detached from the “city”, and is meant to be a site of protection, comfort, and familiarity. In doing so, I also argue that houselessness has been problematically comprehended within this framework as a lack of home. Following that, I examine of the evolving politics of inhabitation in Mumbai that institutionalised urban housing in exclusive terms. I interrogate what it is to experience home outside the confines of a physical structure. How does this understanding complicate dominant notions of public space? I answer these questions in the empirical section that articulates how home is experienced and claimed in spaces, such as the public footpath, by the (re)production of spatial and moral boundaries and by imbibing transient domesticities.

Rethinking the Binaries of Home/Homelessness and Public/Private

Most commonly associated with an interior physical structure, home is at the heart of human lives that fundamentally represents a set of relationships lived over space and time. A volume of scholarship has examined the concept of home as highly subjective and critiqued the assumptions that experiences of home and domesticity are universal, mundane, and familiar (Beeckmans et al. 2022; Blunt and Sheringham 2019; Blunt and Varley 2004; Brickell 2012; Mallett 2004). Intersections of class, gender, race, caste, and social identities have complicated the understanding of home as a space of shelter, rest and protection. Feminist scholarships portray home as a political arena, challenging the humanistic associations of home as a source of stability and security, conceptualised instead as a sphere that can be alienating and oppressive (Baxter and Brickell 2014; Blunt and Dowling 2006; Brickell 2012; Charlton and Meth 2017; Easthope 2004; McDowell 1997; Meth 2003; Somerville 1997). Analysing the negative associations of home, scholars have argued that spatial imaginations exhibit a specific materiality of the home in relation to adverse experiences (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Mallett 2004; Meth 2003; Naples 1996). Yet the idea of home as a site of oppression is largely drawn from heteronormative Western experiences where constructions of family/household came to be synonymously viewed with home and circulated a physical idea of home and its lack as homelessness. Rather, as others have argued that home is a powerful site of cooperation, emancipation, protection, and self-organisation in a realm where one’s identity and existence is under threat (Grewal 1996; hooks 1990; Vasudevan 2017; Young 2005).

As Grewal (1996:136) articulates: “‘Home’ and its distinction from abroad/market or from ‘harem’ was a concept-metaphor that was fundamental to the

comparative framework of colonial modernity". Thus, as "city life" became more pronounced, a stark distinction between the public and the private spheres emerged in the "Western bourgeois societies" (Blunt and Sheringham 2019) to define "home life", and imaginations of the modern city got predicated along with this normative division. However, in the pre-colonial Indian context, the public and the private were much more diffuse, and it was with the emergence of colonial administration that the public became more clearly defined (Bandyopadhyay 2022; Blunt 1999; Kaviraj 1997) and infused with a "bourgeois sensibility of civic patriotism" (Young 2005:9). Writing about the evolving nature of public space, Glover (2007:212) notes:

Indian cities had physical spaces that were shared in common, accessible to all ... and in many ways physically identical to what the colonial government would later call "public" urban space ... By naming certain urban properties and spaces "public", drafting rules ... and enforcing these rules ... the colonial government created both a concept and a corporeal substance—"public space"—that had no prior history in the Indian city.

Colonial governance not only shaped the nature of urban public space but also the notions of home and the private sphere (Blunt 1999). Framed largely by upper-class and upper-caste sensibilities, notions and practices around the home and public spaces were deeply tied to property relations. With the simultaneous regulation of the public and private space, the sidewalk (or footpath) emerged as a masculine, liberal and rights-bearing urban space of accomplishing urban citizenship (Anjaria 2016; Bandyopadhyay 2022; Blomley 2010; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2011). However, in the Indian and South Asian contexts, the mono-functional use of the sidewalk as a pedestrian-first space has been historically contested in the way it functioned to serve economic, domestic, social, and political needs (Anjaria 2012; Bandyopadhyay 2017; Kidambi 2016). These ideals of the home and the outside have historically been at odds with practices of urban inhabitation where for example street living and squatting in various urban interstices was commonplace (Anjaria 2012,2016; Bandyopadhyay 2022; Nakamura 2014). In other words, squatting and improvisational living have been historical features of Indian cities and the personalisation of the street and urban spaces has been a constitutive genealogy of urban India. As Ahuja (1997:50) articulates, "the demarcation between the private and public was loose and nebulous, unlike in the West", and the domestic expanded outdoors or in collective spaces. Bandyopadhyay (2022:58) frames these usages as rescuing common spaces, such as the streets and pavements, "from an exclusive regime of property and exchange value".

Young (2005) has illuminated through examples of habitation in Botswana, that even in modern capitalist societies, home is fulfilled in dwelling, which in a wider sense spills over outdoors or in collective spaces, from the domestic interiors. These practices and notions of inhabitation then challenge hegemonic constructions of not just home and private space but also homelessness and public space. Indeed, Western scholarship highlights how the city has functioned as a realm where the intimate has been a dominant feature of urban life (Beeckmans

et al. 2022; Blunt and Sheringham 2019; Di Palma et al. 2008; Kawash 1998; Lancione 2022; Low 2016; Vasudevan 2017). Particularly significant has been the contribution of scholarship that focuses on homelessness as a dominant urban feature, albeit marginal. This scholarship frames homelessness existing within landscapes of exclusion—operating as defiance of socio-spatial geographies (Gibson 2011; Goodling 2020; May et al. 2007; Wright 1997) and in relation to dispossession from private property (Gowan 2010; Kawash 1998; Roy 2017). These suggest something fundamental about the notions and practices around public space in the Western context. As Low (2016) argues, in Western societies discourse and practices around public space reinforce hegemonic notions of citizenship. Advancing these discussions, I argue that responses to homelessness in the global North have been much more revanchist precisely due to the stark divisions of domestic and public spaces, both deeply rooted in constructions of private property. Foregrounding alternative practices of home bears significance in countering dominant notions of homelessness but also in understanding the persistent struggles and navigations that are central to specific forms of urban home-making (Anjaria and McFarlane 2011; Bayat 2000; Benjamin 2008). As a spatialised and politicised concept, critical notions of home have the potential to “re-envision” homeless as simply being “cast out” in spaces that are largely urban and interior. Thus, “homelessness” does not offer an appropriate framework to understand domestic practices taking place on a footpath.

Yet, in contemporary Indian policy and planning practices home and house has been deliberately conflated. The most obvious manifestation of the conflation of home and house is palpable in developmental interventions on housing from which the state has significantly receded (Doshi 2013), and the more recent emergence of shelter-centric homelessness activism, both of which fail to acknowledge home as a function of cultural and social relations. Thus, following neoliberal ideals, “property centrism” has been regarded as the predominant form of tenure in developmental interventions on housing (Ghertner 2015). While on one hand there has been a tendency to synonymise houselessness with urban poor groups living in slums or “substandard housing” (Banerjee 2018; Chakravarti 2014; Menon 2013), on the other, there has been a tendency to conflate homelessness with the census definition of houselessness (Jha and Kumar 2016; Mander 2007). This understanding of homelessness homogenises urban poverty and disregards the context-specific dwelling practices and the varied spatial and social experiences of home, problematically perpetuating hegemonic notions of urban belonging.

Footpath-Dwellers, Housing Beneficiaries, and the “Homeless”: The Politics of Urban Inhabitation in Mumbai

The politics of inhabitation in Mumbai can be categorised in two distinct ways: the politics of *housing* vs the politics of *home*. The former refers to developmental interventions that aim to “fix” the housing shortage by making tangible forms of residence available to people. Whether it is official welfare interventions and

rights-based mobilisations around resettlement or more recent shelter-centric activism, the politics of housing hinges on the paternalistic discourse that inadequate housing conditions can be remedied by locating people either in concrete tenements or in institutional shelters. These narratives of housing contradict the politics of home that are the everyday persistent and emplaced assertions centring around people's embodied and affective experiences of dwelling.

During a spurt of judicial activism in the 1980s, "formerly excluded groups known as pavement dwellers" (Doshi 2013:849) emerged as a strongly mobilised and distinct category of urban poor who were included in housing resettlement programmes in Mumbai (Appadurai 2001; Doshi 2013; Menon 2010; Roy 2009). Particularly significant was the judicial case of Olga Tellis vs the Municipal Corporation of Bombay (now Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, or MCGM), where the petitioners advocated to protect footpath-dwellers in Mumbai from mass evictions. The historic judgment acknowledged the improvisational ways through which people dwell, and stated that without substantial alternatives, "squatters return to their original sites near their place of employment" (Chandrachud 1985:35). The judgement, passed over three decades ago, continues to be relevant today as it countered governance mechanisms of the state and paved the way towards the emergence of "collaborative" developmental interventions. Activists and NGOs, along with grassroots communities, engaged with the state to set terms of housing in the city, which so far had been the prerogative of the state. Thus, access to formal housing in Mumbai has been deeply embedded within what Roy (2009) calls "the politics of inclusion", albeit partial, which attempted to institutionalise grassroots participation. Tenement-style housing was administered through the tenuous process of beneficiary identification, evictions, waiting in transit camps, and rehousing in delineated residential projects which severed the social and economic linkages that people fostered and survived by over the years. While undoubtedly the politics of inclusion provided politically and socially invisible groups the means to negotiate terms of belonging in the city (Appadurai 2001; Menon 2013), it nonetheless followed a "neoliberal" (Doshi 2013) citizenship framework that produced differentiated subaltern subjectivities of belonging and dispossession. Advancing Ong's (in Doshi 2013) framing of "graduated citizenship", Doshi argues that the redevelopment rules create variegated experiences of subaltern subjectivity transcending formal citizenship, housing legality and forms of moral collectivity that fragment one's claims to the city.

In-depth interviews with employees of an eminent NGO that led the beneficiary identification under the Mumbai Urban Infrastructure Project (MUIP) (and the one that impacted interlocutors), attested that *all* pavement dwellers residing in Masinpada were not eligible for the resettlement. These interviewees cited lack of domicile proof as the key reason for this exclusion. Indeed, interlocutors who were residing in Masinpada at the time the survey was conducted, did not feature in the survey list that I obtained. The casual tone in which respondents expressed that they did not pay attention ("*dhyan nahi diya*") to the mandates of the state to prove resettlement¹ eligibility reflects something fundamental about institutionalised processes of inclusion on one hand and agency of people on the other.

Institutionalised participatory processes, such as community consultations, fail to accommodate differentiated needs and aspirations of urban belonging. Thus the inaction to prepare documents reflects the reluctance of these groups to accept housing that the state was providing. However, all excluded footpath dwellers did not make this decision actively. While literature on urban dispossession in Mumbai have abundantly documented structurally exclusionary housing policies (Björkman 2015; Doshi 2013; Roy 2009), the fact that urban poor groups deliberately opt out of state-organised housing welfare schemes remains sparsely documented (Iyer 2015; Sinha and Alam 2018). Interlocutors shared that their lack of attention to produce the documentation required to be eligible for resettlement was because they did not want to be relocated to city's most underserved fringes. In this way they resisted being dislocated from their from their networks and, most importantly, their means of livelihood. While welfare programmes for the poor assume that beneficiaries are passive recipients, these rejections signify silent signs of survival (Chakrabarty 2002; Scott 1986) and more importantly any alternative visions of home that differ from hegemonic expressions of habitation in the city.

Asifa (name changed) recounted her cyclical housing story of moving from the street to a flat to coming back to the footpath. As an eligible beneficiary of a housing scheme, she had received a flat in a distant suburb of Mumbai that among other things caused her loss of livelihood and social networks. Inability to secure work and the increased costs and physical labour associated with high-rise living ultimately led her to come back to the footpath. Many would perceive Asifa's move from the street to a house as a success story of development intervention and housing welfare, and her subsequent move back to the street as relapsing to "homelessness". However, Asifa has a different narrative to offer. She recounted how being severed of her familiar ties, a known site and means of livelihood was alienating and disrupted her established economic and social bonds. Asifa's move to her new flat situated her in a house but rendered her effectively homeless. For her the distinction (and the conflation) between home and house becomes quite clear, as she stated that "*humein makan toh mila thaa, lekin ghar nahi*" ("we got a house but not a home"). Asifa's active refusal to adhere to the bourgeois order of the city (Chakrabarty 2002:77) not only challenges dominant ideas of home and ownership but also fails to recognise that informality and appropriation have been intrinsic survival mechanisms (Nakamura 2014). These appropriations and forms of dwelling significantly shape the nature of public spaces in India, as do emerging forms of gated communities, private estates, and "modern" living (Bandyopadhyay 2022). Similar to Asifa, accounts of people rejecting government-provided housing to return to the streets are usual occurrences in Indian cities (Iyer 2015; Sinha and Alam 2018). These housing programmes highlight the continuities of home/house conflation and lack of sensitivity towards subaltern expressions of home and domesticity, not just in policy but in homelessness activism. How did then people like Asifa, who were previously out of the ambit of housing welfare, get subsumed under homelessness activism in Mumbai?

The 2010 Commonwealth Games, that witnessed mass scale evictions and deaths of the houseless in India, formed the "critical event" (Das and Singh 1995)

that “triggered a mobilisation campaign” (Dupont 2013) leading to a landmark judicial directive mandating all state governments and urban local bodies to construct shelters (Goel et al. 2017). This concerted the previously disaggregated actions around shelters and marked the beginning of “homelessness” activism in India (Dupont 2013; Goel et al. 2017; Mander and Jacob 2010; Nair 2017; Sodhi 2021). The census definition of houselessness² was (re)interpreted by activists to include all those “who do not have a home or settled place or abode ... who spend their nights in shelters, on the pavement, at their workplace, in public spaces, or at construction sites” (NRTH 2011:16), as homeless (Mander 2007). The blanket categorisation of homelessness homogenised the experience of houselessness in Delhi and travelled to other cities failing to acknowledge spatial biographies and diverse socio-cultural compositions that reconfigure urban spaces to create home. Thus many urban poor groups who were previously excluded from redevelopment politics in Mumbai, got subsumed under homelessness activism. These categorisations advanced Western experiences of homelessness that signify a condition of dispossession in relation to a physical structure, i.e. house, existing without affect. In geographical contexts where kinship ties and social networks form a central aspect of organising life and learning to survive in the city, these homogenisations obscure the specificities of dwelling practices of a vast majority of urban poor. As Speak (2013) attests, much of the work around “homelessness” in the global South has avoided “reconceptualisation” and that definitions developed in the Western countries have been borrowed without considering the locale-specific contexts. Irrefutably, shelter-centric mobilisations was strategically significant in drawing attention of an indifferent state to some of the immediate glaring humanitarian neglect. But as Dupont (2013) articulates, “emergency and humanitarian measures cannot be substitutes for a proper rehabilitation policy that transcends the sole issue of shelter ... addressing ... housing needs ... but also access to basic amenities, ... health care ... education ... and most importantly, livelihood opportunities”.

The homelessness trope that circulated within civil society and activists regarded street and pavement dwellers as passive victims of state neglect. Contrarily, everyday links with the state actors are more collaborative and navigational than imagined. Interlocutors shared with me various official documents which recognised the footpath as their residential address. On scanning some of these documents, what struck me was the range of official papers and the ways the addresses were registered. The documents ranged from birth certificates issued by the municipality to passbooks of state-owned banks, survey slips conducted by government officials, ration cards, and more recently issued *Aadhaar* cards. Issued by different apparatuses of the state, these documents acknowledged that their holders resided on the footpaths of Masinpada. Particularly interesting was the incompleteness in the addresses and the ways they were written. Without noting an exact house or plot number, these documents mentioned several urban landmarks to represent where people lived. *Bajula* (adjacent to), *Samor* (opposite to), etc. were some of the place-based directions that these addresses bore in the absence of a precise identifier. These documents spanned a vast range of time, showing the historical continuities of the practice of formally recognising the

footpath as people's residential location. Officially acknowledging the footpath, a public space, as a residential space points towards several contradictions. This also points towards a contradiction in my previously stated empirics where people used the lack of documents as a strategy to navigate resettlement. However, both these acts are not very different and point towards the strategies people apply to claim home and defy homelessness. As exemplified, Figure 2 portrays how a police barricade has been appropriated by footpath-dwellers to carry out their intimate functions of everyday domesticity. This scene is at odds with narratives of housing and more recent shelter related activism and scholarship that positions the state as entirely anti-poor. They overlook urban processes which render marginalised groups such as the urban houseless visible, although only at the margins.

These incremental and de-facto claims produce "spaces for vigorous and ongoing renegotiations of what can count as permitted ways of living in the city" (Rao 2013:760). Further, these practices enabled by the tacit acknowledgment of the state contradict the modernity discourse wherein the "neoliberal" state is in perpetual opposition to all poor (Banerjee-Guha 2011). The tacit acknowledgment embodies what Bandyopadhyay (2017) calls "counter-pedestrianisms" and are in direct contravention to the very laws and urban planning measures that the state devises. Ghertner (2015:555) theorises these as expressions of "tenure diversity" that produce forms and uses of urban space that enable "occupancy



Figure 2: A police barricade appropriated for domestic use (source: author, fieldwork, 2018)

without ownership rights". For people with limited means, it is these de-facto claims that Simone (2004:407) describes as "modes of provisioning and articulation [that] are viewed as making the city productive, reproducing it, and positioning its residents, territories and resources in specific ensembles" that provide "hope" for people. While these documents guarantee no legitimate claims to urban space, they make possible de-facto access to government benefits like subsidised food, health care, and evidence of residence to access services like banks and admissions to schools. Acquired incrementally, these acts of dwelling in the urban embed these marginalised groups with specific urban geographies. It shows how making-home from below is enabled by engaging, rather than confronting with the state agencies, development actors and the city in general.

Footpath Domesticities: The Politics of City in the Home

Roughly 40 households inhabit two footpaths; one of which adjoins the boundary walls of the Western line of the Mumbai Suburban Railway, the other a gated community, and in between a broad carriageway connects the suburbs to the central business district in Mumbai. Interlocutors inhabit a central and busy intersection of the city and it is this very nature of their inhabitation that warrants an ontological reflection beyond occupancy politics to comprehend marginalised living. I use the word "roughly" to suggest that the size of the households varied owing to periodic migration but more essentially I allude to the heterogeneity of footpath dwellings. While an average family comprised six members, there were also single-member households. Whether it is avoiding a municipal raid by temporarily moving away or adjusting the everyday domestic practices to accommodate the ebbs and flows of moving traffic and pedestrian flows or carrying out mundane economic and domestic functions, everyday home-making integrates various forms of transient boundary-making in sync with the contingencies of the city suggesting a fundamental contradiction to "settled" domesticities. They emphatically highlight that home is not necessarily experienced as a site of comfort, and that mobility is at the heart of the claiming home in the city (Kawash 1998). Interlocutors occupied this area much before the adjoining slum settlements, high-rises, apartment complexes, offices, roads, and even the footpath on which they currently live had been constructed. In other words, they arrived here before the city took its current shape. Yet the citywide labelling of these groups as "vagrants", "encroachers", "homeless", and "beggars" (Iyer 2015) completely obscure their spatial histories and affect their abilities to stake claims to urban space. These perceptions produce a material effect in the way these groups are treated by powerful actors such as administrative and law enforcing authorities, upper-class residents, NGOs and charities, and so forth.

A mobile cooking unit, foldable mattresses, and innumerable travel bags used as storage for everyday items are examples of domestic objects that can be easily adapted to the occurrences of the street, or removed when necessary, for example in the event of an impending municipal raid. These intimate objects of everyday use are pervasive features of urban spaces in South Asian cities which blend

the public and the private. They embody what Roy (2017) calls “the politics of emplacement”, spatial strategies of those dispossessed from property to make de-facto claims. Creation and maintenance of imagined and frequently shifting material boundaries were means by which footpath-dwellers set their homes apart from the street, distinguished their domestic lives from the public. Interlocutors shared that these practices of boundary making were necessary owing to the public nature of their domestic and income-generating spaces and absence of conventional physical barriers. It is this transience in their everyday living which sets them apart from the “housed” residents of the city (Banerjee 2018). And it is through these consistent attempts of retaining their domestic functions and livelihood practices that they counter homelessness.

One of my earliest encounters associated with interlocutors’ boundaries of home and the outside was in relation to shoes. In the absence of a formal entry and exit to their homes, footpath-dwellers demarcated spaces on the pavement beyond which shoes were not allowed. This space represented their home. The edge of the elevated platforms formed the boundary where shoes had to be left. While the dwellers’ domestic spaces had extended to the street (Figure 1), the elevated platforms formed the intimate and sacred space that was required to be distinguished and shielded. However, more than the concern with hygiene and pollution, the placing of shoes represented the symbolic boundaries that interlocutors mapped in order to set the home apart from the street and more essentially counter the forces that may render them homeless. Pedestrians, too, usually walked on the carriageway rather than on the footpath without any protest, as it seemed to be widely accepted, not just in Mumbai but across South Asia, that streets are domestic spaces. On some occasions, I observed intense tensions arising when pedestrians violated the domestic spaces by walking on the footpath. These occasional tensions reflect how the pedestrians’ rights of passage are in direct opposition to the consistent efforts that the footpath-dwellers make to preserve their homes in a realm that is easily destroyed. Notably, this distinction between the inside and the outside operates on a symbolic terrain with some material effects and is at constant odds with the commuters’ right to walk on the pavement (Bandyopadhyay 2017; Blomley 2010). These notions of inside/outside are in stark contrast with hegemonic notions of private and public that are hinged on exclusive rights over place, property, and proprietary. In the absence of material barriers such as doors, windows, locks, gates, partitions, etc.—i.e. objects that are ordinarily used for securing the inside from harms of the outside—these symbolic boundaries had tangible effects in manufacturing a sense of protection and belonging in a realm where they were starkly visible and largely undesirable.

As Valentine (1999:58) articulates, “food is one way of acting out a fiction of community and of struggling against imagined forces of disintegration, is also a linking process, a way of expressing cultural unity, of not just composing but also recomposing boundaries”. As an everyday activity, food preparation and consumption are at the centre of urban street life in South Asian cities and play an important role in consolidating senses of belonging and attaching a form of identity to a place (Anjaria 2016; Solomon 2015). Food related activities not only socially bound the footpath dwellers but also suggested notional rather than

material distinctions of inside and outside. One evening as I chatted with Monu (name changed), she lamented her inability to perform *ghar-ka-kaam* (domestic work) owing to a terrible headache that gripped her. Pointing towards a street-food vendor, sitting barely five metres away, she expressed her frustrations regarding the fact that her family would now have to eat from the vendor, which she referred to as *bahar-ka-khana* (outside food). The vendor and Monu were both staking de-facto claims to the footpath and engaged in similar activities, such as assembling raw materials and fuel, in preparing the food. Yet, her use of the terms *ghar/bahar* struck me as symbolic for two reasons. One, it demonstrated what home meant to her and how it was fulfilled by making distinction between food she cooks and the one obtained from the vendor which in Mumbai's context holds specific cultural and political currency (Solomon 2015). To her cooked food that is bought from a vendor is food from outside, but the food that is cooked by a family member in their living spaces constitutes *ghar-ka-khana*, even if both these activities are taking place at proximate distances. Two, these classifications of food exist even within those not living on the footpaths, but the dimensions of home/outside are physical rather than notional. Unlike, the upper-class concerns of health and hygiene regarding "street-food" (Solomon 2015), Monu's concern centred on the sudden unexpected expense that her family would have to incur and overall inability to express care. The practice of cooking and preparing food is not only an economising strategy, but also social and spatial strategies of persistence. The distinction in food, despite their preparation in the same place on the street, also suggests the ubiquitous co-existence of the private and the public in urban India.

In the absence of conventional material boundaries, myriad physical borders are produced to differentiate the domestic realm from the street and are necessitated because the two spheres are in simultaneous existence. One such example can be seen in Figure 3 in which a mosquito net has been erected to protect pet chickens from fast-moving traffic. This quotidian expression of affection to animals is symptomatic of the ability to foster and control life-forms and spaces, in this instance the symbolic territories of the home and the street. The expression of care starkly manifested in interlocutors' relationships with animals, constituted a crucial aspect of experiencing home. Almost every dwelling unit reared a pet, and family members spent considerable time and energy ensuring their safety. The very nature of their habitation along an open street with speeding traffic and fast-paced commuters caused anxiety among the interlocutors regarding the safety of their pets. Interlocutors would use several kinds of identity tags such as painting the chickens in various colours to mark a difference between the animals on the streets and their pets. These demonstrated affection and care in keeping animals safe by preventing them from running into traffic, being stolen or getting lost. Speer (2017) notes similar practices among homeless encampments in Fresno, California, to argue that affective attachments play a pivotal role in the rejection of paternalistic housing projects that preclude people from living with animals. Thus, not just in Mumbai, but universally, living with animals constitutes an important feature of street inhabitation. These connections are often disregarded when planning for housing or shelter (Watson 2003). They establish how



Figure 3: Pet chickens being protected from the harms of the street (source: author, fieldwork, 2018)

dominant visions of home rationalise paternalistic and punitive development interventions of housing and shelter that not only dislocates them from their established survival networks and livelihood sources, but also disregards cultural dimensions of dwelling.

The street and the home were set apart through the production of boundaries drawn from socio-gendered norms of street-based propriety. These logics were mapped onto the bodies of respondents through various kinds of disciplining necessitated by the fact that the exposed nature of their homes on the street made them vulnerable on several fronts. There were strict codes of behaviour for women in the community regarding how they could sit, eat, socialise, display their bodies, what they could wear and where they could travel. The women in the community internalised the boundaries to protect their *izzat*, a South Asian cultural concept of individual and collective honour and prestige produced through the patriarchal control over women and men's sexualities (Shah 2014). For the men, it entailed protecting the *izzat* of the women in their community but more importantly not violating (or perceived to be violating) the *izzat* of upper-class women who frequently commuted along that stretch of the road. The imagined boundaries of the home materialised through restrictions imposed on the bodies of women to achieve two things: to safeguard from sexual violation by men from "outside" and to disassociate themselves from street-based sex workers who are perceived to be a threat to the "public morality" (Shah 2014:143). Thus

the notion of *izzat*, deeply embedded into upholding public morality and personal safety, was crucial for respondents to safeguard their homes from disintegrating and persisting on the streets.

Feminist scholars writing about public space argue that as megacities like Mumbai strive to make a place among global cities of the world, the presence of upper- and middle-class women in public space as professionals and consumers represents necessary modernity (Phadke et al. 2009). While these scholars vehemently promote the dismantling of the discourse of respectability, owing to its patriarchal control over women, in creating inclusive public spaces, they only refer to women who are in two opposing spheres. In effect, these theorisations of the urban continue to place the home and the street as spatially exclusive to one another. These expositions remain silent on ideas and practices of respectability calibrated by women who create the domestic within the public.

Figure 4 exemplifies what I call a “performance of modesty”, a necessary strategy of producing moral boundaries. The photograph represents a domestic space where alongside a fading flower vase, discarded furniture, a wooden plank holding makeup, a purse, a doll, and other objects of everyday use, we see the cover page of a discarded magazine being used as a decorative poster. These abundantly appropriated artefacts on the streets go beyond the aesthetic organisation of the home, they symbolise how public spaces are cautiously personalised by people who have no sustained claim over them. These objects are not just



Figure 4: Performing modesty (source: author, fieldwork, 2018)

material artefacts in abstract space but have “become layered with meaning and personal value” (Young 2005:140). A closer look at the photograph reveals that the red mark on the model’s forehead on the magazine cover was originally not there but had been superimposed. A respondent explained that the mark of the *sindoor* (a vermilion-coloured cosmetic powder applied by Hindu women on their foreheads to symbolise marriage), defended the individual and collective honour of an actual and imagined community of footpath dwellers by aligning with the “morality” of public spaces (Shah 2014). It was a necessary demonstration of propriety on the one hand, masculine protection on the other, both of which functioned to counter the unpopular perceptions about street-based women polluting the moral fabric of the city streets. These acts are strikingly similar to middle- and upper-class practices of modesty (Phadke et al. 2009). Yet the logics of these performances vary from upper- and middle-class women for whom protection of *izzat* is mostly for the self (by extension for her family). Contrarily, for interlocutors, self-protection is as crucial as protecting the public perception of the larger community. Protection of self is necessary owing to the prevalence of violence against street-dwelling women just not in this location but across Mumbai (Natu and Das 2019; Ravindran 2016; Tatke 2013). Referring to their exposed living conditions, respondents often alluded to the hyper-visibility of their living (“*Pura shahar hum ko dekh sakta hai*” / “the whole city can see us”) that attracts the wrath of law enforcing authorities and upper-class residents whenever any instances of violence in the community occurred.

Self-initiated efforts of surveillance were undertaken to counter the common misperceptions regarding street-dwelling men as perpetrators of violence on women in public places. As a vigilant member of the community, Madan (name changed), also one of the oldest members, prides himself on being the *aankh*. While the literal translation of *aankh* is eyes, metaphorically it alludes to the consistent attempts of community-initiated surveillance undertaken to manufacture a sense of safety. It is made necessary, as in the dominant discourse of urban modernity, the lack of legitimacy of lower-class men in urban public spaces is framed by locating them as potential source of threat to upper- and middle-class women as putative perpetrators of sexual harassment and assault. Embedded in the consciousness of the footpath-dwellers, this narrative has shaped the way men in the community produced and maintained boundaries of the home by taking up guardianship of the street and by creating distinctions between insiders and outsiders. *Baharwale* (outsiders) broadly refers to those who do not reside on the footpath and whose presence could be a potential threat. As per interlocutors, outsiders are those who draw the negative attention of law-enforcement authorities and upper-class residents in the area by engaging in petty crimes such as mobile- and chain-snatching, traffic violations, street-based sexism, drug-dealing, and soliciting for sex work at a nearby junction. This reference to “outsiders” is worthy of attention as it alludes to a notion of belonging based on residence on the footpath validated by self-initiated measures of protection. The insider/outsider distinction, here, is not invoked in relation to a physical structure but to assert claims to location in the city where space was highly contested and within a neighbourhood where they were deemed undesirable. It is enabled by

circulating a narrative that the male members of the footpath were not perpetrators but protectors. Thus, self-initiated surveillance mechanisms countered the narratives circulated by adjoining upper-class residents that the footpath-dwellers were a nuisance that needs to be removed. Madan's words suggest a kind of social protection that is beyond a top-down institutional realm (Kaba 2021). It is one that is fostered through social relations, familiarity with the streets and a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. Madan and many others like him take pride in their care towards the community and claim that it is not the police vehicle that is often stationed less than three metres from his place, but the presence of the community that keeps the neighbourhood safe. By taking on guardianship of the street, men like Madan contour the moral boundaries their home on one hand and public space on the other.

The practices cited above underscore the making of home from below, though home was experienced by residents on the footpath in several other ways. At the heart of the making of homes in urban space by marginalised groups is the simultaneous existence of the public and the private, which sometimes exist in a blend and at other times in stark opposition to each other. The consistent efforts that men like Madan undertake to create a notion of insidership are intrinsic to this making of home that draws strength not from exclusive rights over property or space but through persistent embedding. The claiming of home in spaces that are considered to be public is key to this home making. The precarities of these claims highlight the social and economic positions from which they are made and hence these acts of domesticating the urban streets are from "below" rather than "above".

Conclusion

Scholarship, policy perceptions, and city-wide notions on street and footpath dwelling populations in Indian cities have treated these groups as either homeless or existing as spatial exceptions rather than paying attention to how these urban dwellers are attached to place and invoke a sentiment of home to stake a claim to urban space. This paper focuses attention on footpath dwellers in Mumbai and their expressions and practices of home. Unlike more dominant forms of informal dwellings, such as the "slum", studying homemaking on the footpath offered a distinctive methodological reflection in theorising the agency of the marginalised. By critiquing the privileging of a physical structure and property as home and the lack of it as homelessness, I call for the dismantling of Western frameworks of theorising cities in the global South. Reading the city this way has significance in terms of how housing, home, and inclusion within the city are mediated. In doing so, I advance scholarship that views "home" as a powerful site of emancipation to organise and resist larger structural forces of oppression. In the Indian context, the dichotomy between private and public spaces was perpetuated and intensified through colonial governance and hegemonic notions of property and proprietary. Within this the footpath and similar public urban locations emerged as rights-bearing spaces of citizenship. By highlighting the tensions that result in domesticating a busy footpath in one of Mumbai's neighbourhoods I argue that

these practices contradict the totalising discourses of modern urbanity of the public and private existing in opposing spheres.

An analysis of housing developmentalism and shelter-centric activism has shown how dominant discourses of inclusion politics in Mumbai, though distinct in their focus and approach, have upheld hegemonic practices of shelter, housing, and urban belonging. While the pavement-dwelling politics in Mumbai highlight how a strongly mobilised group of pavement-dwellers became an important political category who were able to secure housing, others were left out on the streets. It is these groups who were eventually identified as “homeless” when homelessness activism gained traction in India. Similarly, Asifa’s housing history highlights insensitivity towards subaltern logics of home and domesticity. I stress that “homelessness” is not an appropriate framework to analyse dispossession in relation to “house”. In order to broaden the understanding of home, there is a need to go beyond an association with material structures and bring within its fold different kinds of dwellings, the role of kinship and extended family, social norms, attitudes to ownership, and so forth. More importantly, this understanding of home needs to transcend a material interiority that continues to dominate and shape various discourses around safety, security, belonging, and mobility. I argue that a home on the footpath reveals various contradictions (Ghertner 2015) to theorising the urban as an increasingly gentrified realm that with the support of the state serves the interest of the propertied elites (Banerjee-Guha 2011; Gandy 2008; Harvey 1978). As articulated by Simone (2016:151), “If we only pay attention to the rollout of contemporary spatial products as exemplars of urban neoliberalism, we might miss opportunities to see something else taking place, vulnerable and provisional though it may be”. The ebbs and flows of everyday lives, the networks that enable navigating the challenging street environments, the constant threats of eviction, the regular demolitions, and the relentless recreation and reclaiming of homes on the footpath are all aspects that inhibit alternative practices and visions of dwelling when the city is read in the binary lenses of housed/homeless.

The manner in which interlocutors “emplaced” themselves in the footpath through the strategic personalisation of urban space and simultaneous countering of developmental interventions, suggests how these urban dwellers emerge as “agential beings” (Dupont 2013). Interlocutors devised several ways to persist on the footpath. As evidenced, through the use of footwear, consumption and preparation of food, rearing of pets, gendered disciplining and protection of the body, community, and neighbourhood, notional and physical boundary-making are crucial means of persisting in an urban space over which no legitimate claims exist. The very nature of these domesticities is that they are not “settled” but transient and constantly adapted to the activities of the street. I see these claims of home within urban public space as making-home from below wherein urban dwellers domesticate city spaces without having exclusive rights over them. This conception offers a new way of theorising the personalisation of urban spaces as being inclusive and social, rather than exclusive and hostile. Making-home from below thus enables the fostering of an inclusionary discourse of inhabiting the city

but to also counter dispossessions and injustices in relation to dominant notions of the urban.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Endnotes

¹ See Doshi (2013) for cut-off date politics in Mumbai that was key to proving domicile and subsequent eligibility in housing schemes.

² As per the 2011 census houseless comprised “all those not living in a census house” (Mander 2007). A census house is a concrete structure with a roof.

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